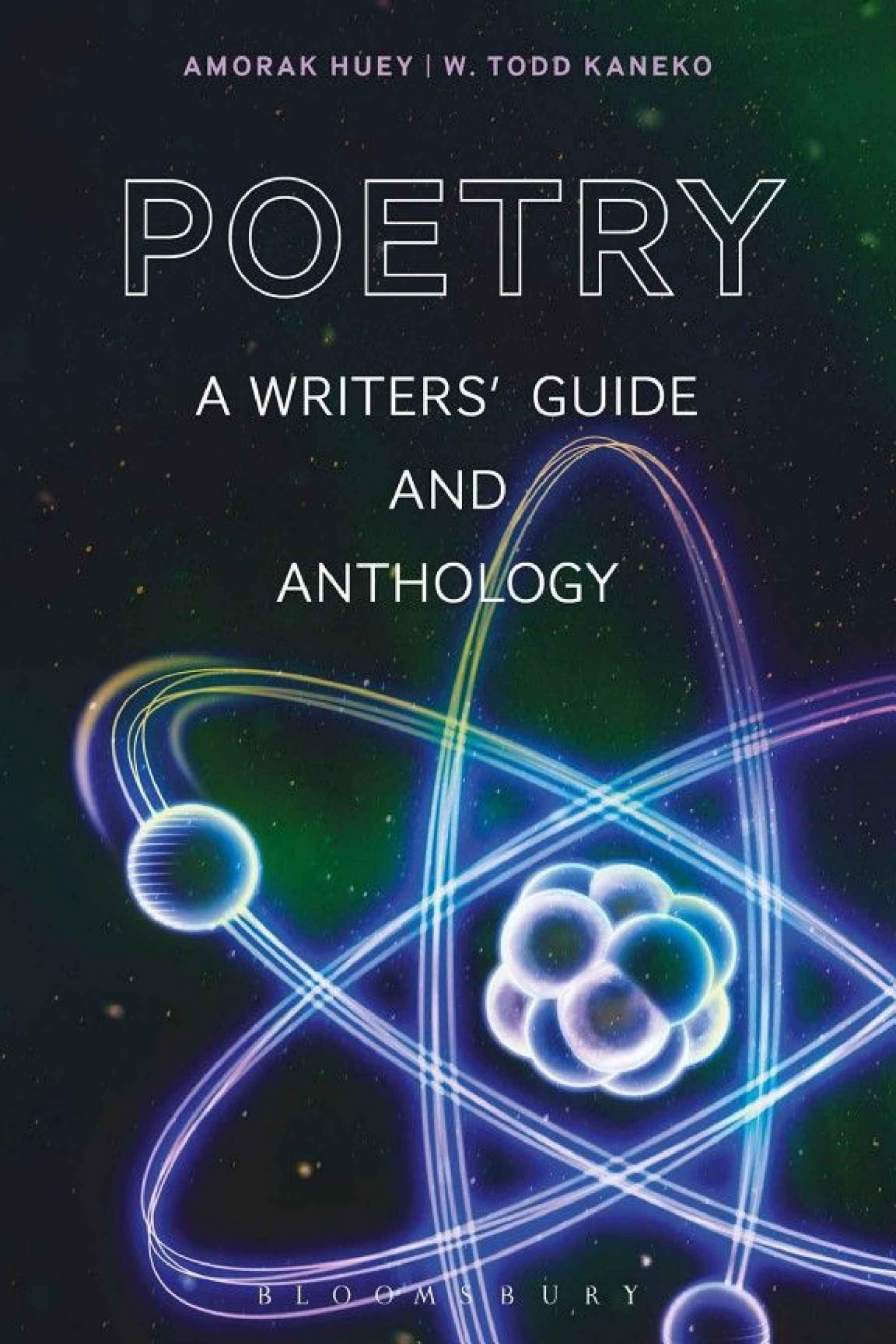
AMORAK HUEY | W. TODD KANEKO

POETRY

A WRITERS' GUIDE AND ANTHOLOGY



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Poetry

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A WRITERS' GUIDE AND ANTHOLOGY

BY AMORAK HUEY &
W. TODD KANEKO

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Preface:
A Word of Welcome for Teachers and Students

You do not need this textbook to become a poet.

Nor do you need to build a resume stuffed with published books before you can claim the title of poet. You don't need to complete an advanced degree or take even a single class. That's because "poet" is not some lofty title which only a select few deserve to claim. Rather, whether you are a poet is determined by two questions:

Do you read poems? Do you write them?

If so, then, yes, you are a poet.

You learn to write poetry—and then you learn to write it better—by doing two things: reading poetry and writing your own. It's truly that simple. Read lots of poems and write every day, or nearly every day, and your poetry will grow and evolve and improve.

This textbook and a well-taught poetry class can, however, provide shortcuts to that growth.

A class provides you with a captive audience of your peers and your teacher: readers to engage with and r`espond to your poems. Your teacher can serve as a mentor and guide through the challenging early stages of reading and writing poetry. You'll have questions as you read and write; your teacher can help you try to answer them. An encouraging teacher can also allay some of the natural fears that you're not good enough, that you somehow don't deserve to be writing—while simultaneously raising the bar for your work, pushing you to accomplish more than you imagined possible.

Imagine poetry is a muscle. If you wanted to make your body stronger, you'd head for a weight room. But when you first walk in, the dazzling array of machines and free weights can be intimidating and confusing. How much should you be lifting? How many repetitions is enough? When do you risk hurting yourself? Which machines develop which muscle groups? The bulked-up veterans in the room are equally intimidating; they all seem to know what they're doing and they

seem to be stronger than you could ever make yourself. If this sounds like how you feel about poetry, know that you're not alone. It's called Imposter Syndrome, and it's a near-universal sensation. We all feel it. The good news is that your teacher can serve as a personal trainer, walking you through the process until you've gained the confidence you need to forge ahead on your own, stronger than before.

This book, too, can play a role in your development as a poet. It is based on two core beliefs about writing in general and writing poetry in particular:

1. **Writing *is* a muscle.** We strengthen that muscle through exercise and repetition, through a daily (or at least near-daily) routine of reading and writing.
2. **Writing poetry is a rhetorical practice.** We shape our poems by making intentional choices about the language we use and by being aware of the effects those choices have on our readers.

This approach is not intended to discount the mystery and magic of creating art. There's certainly something about the creative process that defies easy definition and exists outside the realm of textbooks and guidelines. To be a good writer requires you to approach the world with sensitivity and perception. You must be willing to interrogate your own motives and mindsets. You should be eager to dig past the surface of your daily life, to look for moments of particular beauty and truth.

Then, after all that, you have to *want* to write. No one *has* to be a poet. If you'd rather play soccer or knit sweaters or master the bassoon, that's terrific. When people ask skeptically, "Can creative writing even be taught?" and you can tell by their tone that they think the answer is no, this part of it is probably what they have in mind. It's probably true that no one can teach you the *desire* to write. That has to come from inside you. But if you have that urge? What we can do—what we hope this book does—is help you harness that desire, focus it, and make the most of it, so that the poems you produce are the best versions of themselves.

How this book is built

An introduction to poetry

The opening section of the book sets up our approach to writing and teaching poetry. We believe the most effective to way to teach poetry writing is by focusing on how contemporary poems are built rather than searching for meanings or symbols. We focus on practice rather than interpretation. We encourage teachers and writers to move away from the search for meaning as the primary way of interacting with a poem. Instead, we urge readers to focus on the experience a

poem creates—and how, specifically, the poet uses language to create that experience. Also in this section, we dispense with some myths about talent, and we explore where poems come from and what it means to be a poet.

The elements of poetry

This section is the heart of this book. First, we explain what it means to think of poems as being rhetorically constructed, built to appeal to an audience through logic, emotion, and character. Then we present 38 elements of poetry, in alphabetical order from ambiguity to work. These are the rhetorical components of a poem: the building materials and tools every poet relies on when making a poem. Just as a contractor building a new home needs drywall and nails, lumber and paint and a measuring tape, each serving a different but essential purpose in the process, so too does a poet rely on these elements in the writing process. By studying the elements and learning how they work in a poem, you'll be better equipped to employ them to best effect in your own writing. Our goal with these elements is to make you a more intentional writer, more keenly aware of how language works and how to manipulate it.

Practicalities

Here you'll find useful guidance about how to make best use of your workshop experience. Giving meaningful feedback to your classmates—and learning what to do with the feedback you receive—is a challenge, and we'll guide you through that process. There's also an important chapter on revising poems. Too often, we think of poems as set in stone upon their first draft, finding ourselves at a loss when a teacher requires revision. This chapter will offer practical strategies for moving past that first draft and making your poems better through the revision process. Finally, there's a chapter on poems to avoid: poems we've all read before (if we're being honest, poems we've all written before) but that are generally best left in the past.

Contemporary Poetic Modes: An Anthology

Here, you'll find successful poems by contemporary poets. We offer this selection of poems both as models for your own work and as examples of the range and quality of poetry being produced in the twenty-first century. There's tremendous value in studying classic literature, and we encourage all poets to r ead widely in poems of all eras. However, we believe that studying poems written now or close to now is the best path to learning how to write your own contemporary poems. We reject the notion that poetry is best studied as historical artifact; as one colleague put it, that would be akin to having to prove you understand Mozart before you're allowed to listen to current pop music. We have arranged this anthology by poetic mode; again, the organization is alphabetical, from ars poetica to portrait. These

modes are, in essence, rhetorical stances chosen by the poet, each different mode offering a different lens through which to explore the beauty and chaos of the human experience.

A note about difficult content

One of the things poems do is challenge us. Poems are often confounding syntactically or formally; they ask more of their readers than do most works in prose. Some poems are also challenging in their subject matter. Layli Long Solder's "38" (245–9), for example, presents a narrative about the execution of 38 men executed by the state for doing little more than trying not to starve. Patricia Lockwood's "Rape Joke" (176–9) deals with a sexual assault. Reading about such things can be emotionally difficult.

These poems and others like them are included here not to titillate or traumatize, but to illustrate how poets can take on such tough topics and make art from them—not in a way that minimizes or covers up the trauma and emotion connected to the events depicted, but in a way that explores it and reveals it. These poems explore how language and art help us make sense of experiences and events that are fundamentally impossible to understand.

Our best advice to teachers is to prepare your students for reading these poems by discussing what they teach us about poetry. Focus on what it means for a poet to be unafraid to write about extremely vulnerable or risky experiences, and to do so not in an attempt to be shocking. Help them to understand the difference between reading a poem for its content and reading a poem to figure out how it's built. Moreover, given the wide range of human experience, it's impossible to predict what material a reader will find emotionally difficult, so be sympathetic to students who might be uncomfortable with a poem's content. Given the way that poems often create emotional responses in a reader, try to be understanding when students encounter material they are unable to interact with.

For students, approach these poems as you would those with less challenging content: ask what you can learn from them that you can apply to your own writing. Consider what it means to explore cruelty or trauma in a poem and how a writer uses poetry to transform traumatic experiences into art. These poems teach us something about what it means to tell the truth about the world, even when that truth is ugly.

How to use this book

This book is designed to offer maximum practicality and flexibility for teachers and students using it in a class as well as for poets who've picked it up outside of a formal course of study. In essence, it can be read in any order. You could start by

reading the poems in the anthology and then move on to the elements, first considering your own reaction to the poems before exploring in more depth the rhetorical components that make them work. A teacher might begin by having the class read the "Proceed with Caution" chapter to get those poems out of everyone's system before they start writing. You can explore the elements and modes in any order or any combination; it's easy to imagine a course starting, for instance, with lines and music on the element side, and aubades and nocturnes on the mode side.

No element in this book stands entirely alone; you'll find cross-references throughout, and you could read that way, moving from ambiguity to precision to syntax to diction to language to voice, or along some similar path. The same applies to the modes. There is overlap among them, and most poems are more than one thing. Mary Jo Bang's "The Role of Elegy" (190) is both elegy and ars poetica. Eugenia Leigh's "Recognizing Lightning" (172) is both ars poetica and narrative. Kiki Petrosino's "Nocturne" (219–20) is both nocturne and lyric poem. And so on. Both the modes and elements we present here should be seen as expansive and inclusive, rather than as restrictive, as places to start rather than places to finish.

Many poetry textbooks start by teaching formal verse: the sonnet, the villanelle, the sestina, the haiku, etc. There's a certain comfort in this focus on structure; it's traditional and historical, and it offers a sense of stability, uniformity. You can tell a sonnet is a sonnet by counting lines and syllables; you can recognize a sestina by looking for the pattern in the last word of every line. We have nothing against form; some of the best poems ever written are formal verse. But most contemporary poetry is free verse, and we see this book as teaching poets to write effective contemporary poems. There are plenty of places to learn formal verse, and we've referred you to some of those in Appendix B: Additional Reading. Also, as you'll learn from reading this book, we have a fondness for ambiguity, slipperiness, individuality. We don't think the best way to learn to express yourself effectively is by counting lines. We think it's far better to focus on the rhetorical use of language.

As for the poems in this anthology, we think these are amazing poems—but they are merely the tip of a massive iceberg. If this is your introduction to contemporary poetry, make sure it's just that: an introduction. When you find poems that particularly engage you in this collection, seek out more work by that poet. All of the poets in this book have poems published online that you can find with a quick search, and all of the poets in this anthology have books you can buy or check out from the library (if your library's poetry collection is limited, as many are, use interlibrary loan, or offer a gentle suggestion that they buy more poetry).

You should also continue the process of discovering new poems and poets; the internet is a great resource for that as well. The websites Verse Daily (www.versedaily.org) and Poetry Daily (www.poems.com) and the Poem-A-Day

feature from the Poetry Foundation (www.poets.org) feature new contemporary poems every day, as well as substantial archives. We suggest starting there. For teachers, we encourage you to supplement the poems in this collection with your own favorites, with poems you love to read and teach, as well as other examples of poems in these modes.

As you look for starting places for your writing, we have offered 75 poetry prompts in Appendix A. Each of these suggestions can be used as a spark for your own poems. In addition, the modes themselves can be used as writing assignments: write a documentary poem. Write a portrait. Write an elegy, a love poem, a list poem. You can also use the elements as prompts: write a poem in which you experiment with punctuation and syntax. Write a poem in which you focus on both concision and precision: using as few words as possible to achieve maximum impact.

In the end, we want you to use this book in the way that makes the most sense for you or your class. Everyone learns differently, every teacher teaches differently, and every class has its own set of objectives and desired outcomes. This book is intended to be practical and adaptable, useful in a variety of contexts and approaches. We hope you enjoy it, and we hope it makes you a stronger , more confident poet.

Amorak Huey & W. Todd Kaneko

P.S. If you're on Twitter, we'd love to hear from you. We're @amorak and @toddkaneko. Reach out and tell us how your poetry life is going.

Section I

An Introduction to Poetry

1

Why Do We Write Poems?

A baby cries in the dark and is held.

Cries again and is fed.

In this way, we learn that expression leads to communication. We learn the bonds between language and love.

In many ways, the answer to why we write poems is as simple as this. We are lonely or afraid or cold or hungry. Our need for utterance is primal, innate. We speak in order to find out whether anyone is listening.

Our ability to acquire and use language is encoded in our DNA; language is fundamental to what it means to be human and alive. Since we were huddled around campfires in caves, we have shared stories and songs and poems. Anthropologists have observed that tribal cultures with little or no other forms of art still have a strong tradition of poetry. It's ingrained in us. We are all poets and always have been.

But why poems specifically? And why poems in the twenty-first century, so many thousands of years removed from the cave and campfire? Wouldn't it be easier to post a status, send a text, caption a photo you took on your phone? Wouldn't a memo, a letter, an essay, even a novel be a more straightforward way of making your point, telling your story? Yes, of course. That's precisely why we write poems: because they are not always easy. They are not always intuitive. They can be difficult, challenging, weird.

If someone asked you where you wanted to have lunch and you wrote a poem in response instead of sending a quick text message or replying to their Facebook thread, that would be awkward. If you needed to summarize what happened at a meeting, and you wrote a poem instead of a memo or a news article, that would be inefficient. Clearly, a poem is not the best mechanism for the straightforward delivery of information. This is good to know, because it frees us poets from that burden. If we're not obligated to present information in the most clear and concise manner possible, we must be doing something else when we write poems.

So what are we doing? We are creating an experience for our readers. We are exploring the world as we see it. We are building a work of art using language as our medium. Language is to a poet as paint to a painter, as marble or bronze or wood to a sculptor, as brick and mortar and steel to an architect, as the body to a dancer, as the voice to a singer. Language is limited, naturally. Just as Magritte's painting of a pipe is not itself a pipe, nor is the word "pipe" a pipe. But it's what we have; it's the medium we have chosen. So poets are always pushing against the limits of language, trying to expand the possibilities of what words can do on the page, seeking a new way to say what they mean.

Looking at a painting of a sunset is not quite the same thing as looking at a sunset, but that doesn't necessarily mean it is a lesser experience—merely a different one. The painting presents a version of the sunset that has been filtered through human eyes and human hands and the limits of paint as a medium, so the pleasure of looking at the painting is twofold: first, the experience of a sunset; and second, the experience of seeing how another person views that sunset and tries to reproduce it. What colors, shapes, images appear matter most to the artist? It's the same with a poem. Reading a love poem is not exactly like being in love, but it can activate many of the same parts of the brain—and in addition to that, it yields the experience of understanding someone else's conception of love, both where it matches your own perceptions and where it challenges or expands them. The best poems, our favorite poems, those that speak to us most deeply, alter our own perceptions and become part of us.

Poems might be ingrained in who we are, but they are decidedly not our most natural mode of written communication. Prose is easier on the eye; we are more used to reading words and sentences that fill the margins of the page or screen. Poetry, with its line breaks and associative leaps, its seeming lack of chronology or argument, its focus on image or music, is inherently disruptive. Poems slow us down, call our attention to unusual moments, delight in daring us to understand. Poems resist easy paraphrase. They ask us to embrace ambiguity, to accept uncertainty. That's a feature, not a bug; it's inherent in the art form.

Why do we write poems? We write poems because we have something to say. We write poems because the world can be hard and we want to make sense of our place in it. We write poems because we are moved by our experiences and want to share them. We write poems because writing something down helps us understand it differently. We write poems to help us accept loss or celebrate love or both at once. But we also write poems to reach an audience. We write poems to connect with readers, with other human beings who have also loved and lost and felt and wondered at the world's chaos. We write poems in hopes that our words will touch others as pieces we have read have touched us. We write poems to join in an unending conversation about what it means to be human, to be alive, to suffer and

thrive and grow and love and lose, to despair and to triumph.

The sound that a baby makes as she cries out in the dark cry begins as expression and ends as communication. So, too, does poetry.

2

What Is Meaning?

Chapter Outline

We have been taught that poems have meanings

Yes—poems totally have meanings

1 Poems are always about two things

If you struggle with understanding what poems mean, know that you are not alone. When we sit down to read prose, we are used to the text conveying information for us to use, whether it's to assemble a pressboard bookcase, to comprehend how atoms bond together to create new molecules, or to follow our hero as he leads his armies through steamy swamps to fight the goblin armies of the Doom King. We are used to following a text toward meaning, toward some kind of understanding about the subject. What happened? How does that work? Why is this thing important? We have questions, and we think we have to look for answers in poems because that's what we do when we read prose.

But poems often resist meaning in the traditional sense. They often create or discover new questions rather than delivering concrete understanding to the reader. But don't we have to know what poems mean if we are to read them? And how can we write poems if we don't understand what they mean? Let's talk about what we mean when we talk about meaning.

We have been taught that poems have meanings

So many of us sat through our middle or high school English classes tormented by the question of what a poem means. The teacher stood at the front of the room, spectacles down at the tip of his nose, his bushy mustache twitching as he read lines from a poem by Frost or Whitman or Dickinson and then demanded to know

what they meant. When we raised our hands to take a crack at answering, more than likely we were told that we were wrong.

No one likes to be told they are wrong.

Being told you are wrong all the time turns a potentially interesting conversation about a poem into an excruciating hour in which there are two kinds of answers: the answers that the teacher knows and the stuff everyone else in the room says. The teacher is drawing from time spent studying the poem and the historical context in which it was written. Students have no access to this context and information, so their best guesses at interpretation are based on the text in front of them. This is how many students learn to dislike poetry. They have been taught that reacting to a poem requires outside information and that poems themselves are arcane historical documents (as opposed to, you know, works of art). They have been taught not to trust their own experience with the words on the page. Imagine a student reading a classic poem such as William Blake's "The Tyger," and being initially excited by the energy and fire of the poem and the dangerous power of the tiger and the cool rhymes, only to come to class to be told that to understand the poem, he'll first need to understand what Romantic poets thought about theology. It's no wonder so many people say things like, "Poetry just isn't my jam."

This focus on meaning—especially meaning supplemented by biographical details about the poet or historical information about the period in which it was written—puts an awkward distance between the poem and the reader. It enforces the notion that a poem has one singular meaning that can be somehow objectively determined, like an algebra problem or a riddle. It certainly doesn't inspire most students to craft their own complex, obscure historical document. This is not to suggest that knowing something about the historical context of a poem or about an author's life story cannot enrich the reading experience for some poems; clearly, it can. However, it's important to move past thinking that knowledge is necessary for having any sort of experience with any poem at all. If you are ever going to be able to sit down and write poetry yourself, you need to move past the way many of us were taught about poetry and start to think differently about meaning.

Yes—poems totally have meanings

Poems have meaning. Without meaning, they would be nonsense (which is itself not necessarily a bad thing). But remember that meaning is a complex issue that you don't really have to determine before sitting down to write. Meaning is about communication, connection with an audience. As we've said, poetry isn't the genre best suited for the direct delivery of a singular message, but we do want our poems to mean *something* to our readers.

Here are some things to consider when thinking about how to approach meaning

in your poems.

1 Poems are always about two things

Maybe it's more accurate to say that poems are always about *at least* two things. The literary critic Cleanth Brooks observes in an essay titled "The Heresy of Paraphrase" that it's impossible to summarize a poem and capture all of its meaning. You can summarize a book report or a financial statement, for instance, and relay the important main points the original text is intended to communicate. Any paraphrase of a poem, however, loses the nuance of sound and mood and metaphor—in other words, the very elements that make a poem a poem. This also has to do with the nature of metaphor: as poems work with literal and figurative meanings to create metaphor, they acquire layers of meaning, sometimes even contradictory layers.

This complexity, this layering of ideas and associations, is exactly the work a poem does. You want your poems to fight against the notion that truth can be represented by a single, monolithic truth. You want your words and lines to evoke multiple, simultaneous reactions from your readers. The poem "Ars Poetica" by Traci Brimhall (170) explores the poet's approach to poetry, certainly, but it is also very much about the aftermath of a car accident. On the one hand, "Wonder Woman Dreams of the Amazon" by Jeannine Hall Gailey (240) is a fun piece about the origin of a superhero; on the other, the poem is also about being a woman in the modern world. Similarly, "alternate names for black boys" by Danez Smith (199) makes an overarching statement about the value of black lives in America in the twenty-first century, but the list mode allows the poet to offer seventeen different takes on the subject, each line pushing the reader in a new direction and bringing additional meanings to the poem. These meanings are at once overlapping and contradictory—and *that* is what makes the piece a poem.

2 Poems are not *completely* up to reader interpretation

Even though poems have multiple meanings, it's a mistake to say that they can mean whatever a reader wants them to. From the poet's point of view, you want your language to direct readers toward specific experiences and understandings. If you write a poem about the death of your great-grandmother and a reader says: "I was so touched by this poem about your new kittens," the poem is probably too vague to be understood. A poem that can mean anything is a poem that says nothing.

Think of it this way: Yes, a poem is open to interpretation—but mostly in terms of the associations a reader brings to the poem. As you read the poems in this anthology, you might not always be certain exactly what the poet *means*, but you will rarely be mystified over what a poem is *about*. "Aubade with Bread for the

Sparrows" by Oliver de la Paz (173) is *about* feeding the birds on a winter morning. It leaves a reader pondering any number of things: the starkness of morning, the cruelty of the world, the immense loneliness in the dead of winter, or the complexity of religious faith and doubt—or maybe it reminds you of the way your uncle used to sit in the park every afternoon to throw bread crumbs to the pigeons. All of these different reactions to the poem are legitimate interpretations, but the poem itself is still *about* feeding the birds on a winter morning. The fact that the poem has a clearly rendered subject matter is what allows readers to have their individual reactions and experiences with the language of the poem.

3 Sometimes, meaning is secondary

Instead of delivering a logical conclusion or a clear narrative climax, poems offer up an experience to the reader. Perhaps the point isn't about arriving at a specific destination at the end of a poem. Perhaps the point of the poem is the journey the reader takes between the beginning and the end. Perhaps the poem's aim is the music, not the interpretation of the music. Perhaps the poem aims to evoke a mood or explore an image without being beholden to a narrative arc or an internal coherence. As Kim Addonizio's "You Don't Know What Love Is" (204) unfurls on the page and offers up its images and language and metaphor, the reader experiences the complexity of love, the rebirth of a corpse pulled from a river, the rise and downfall of this figure, the physical intimacy between the speaker and a "you," before the return to the images of death and a funeral again at the end. There are hints of a narrative here, but it's likely that readers will come to different conclusions about the story in that narrative and different conclusions as to precisely what the poem is saying about love. This isn't to say that the poem's meaning isn't important. Clearly, it is, but sometimes as a reader, it's more important to engage in the experience of reading the poem than it is to isolate and analyze all the possible symbols to arrive at some kind of universally agreed-upon truth.

4 As a writer, you don't have to think about meaning

That's a half-truth, really, because at some point you will want to think about what the poem means. But meaning isn't something that you have to know ahead of time. It's not something a writer needs to have planned out before sitting down to write a poem. You don't have to go in thinking about the different symbols you will use or how the poem is going to use a series of references to Langston Hughes, or how the last stanza will be an homage to Homer's *Iliad*. In fact, a poet shouldn't really be thinking about symbols at all. Declaring something in a poem to be a symbol is an act of interpretation, not creating. As a poet, you should focus on using compelling images and concrete, specific details. Let the scholars who study

your work later decide which ones are symbols, and for what.

When you sit down to write, it's often with the intention of exploring a certain experience or an emotion, and you probably have some idea what you want to say about that topic, but you must approach the process with an open mind, willing to reverse course or follow some new path that your language opens up. The best poems become their own thing during the writing process. A poem that marches relentlessly toward a particular conclusion is not exploring, it's explaining. It's also sure to lack the surprise successful poems need.

The trick is to be flexible with your understanding of what the poem is going to be about. Follow the language. Trust in your mind's strange associative powers. When your images and metaphors open a doorway to a new subject, go through it. At that point, the poem might have started to find its own meaning, and that's a good thing indeed.

A note here about writerly intent: As a writer, you'll have specific aims for your poems, experiences you'll want to capture, feelings you'll want to evoke, perhaps even some message you'd like to convey. But once we share our poems with the world, we don't get to walk around with them and say, "Now, what I meant in this line is. . . ." You have to trust that line says what it needs to say all on its own. You need to have spent enough time and effort on each word in that line so that you know it's ready to leave the safety of your hands and venture into the world where readers will interpret as they will. The flip side of this is that you often hear beginning readers of poetry asking, "Why did the poet space these lines like that? What did they mean by this image?" These are the wrong questions. Readers don't have access to the writer's mind (in most cases), and even if they do, writers aren't always the best judges of their own work. What readers have access to is the poem on the page. The right questions to be asking are, "How does it affect my reading experience when the lines are spaced like that? What associations does this image conjure in my mind?" The answers here are slipperier, more ambiguous, and personal—but ultimately more meaningful than playing a guessing game about what the writer had in mind.

Your three brains

It's important for poets to have some understanding of how readers might process information and create meaning as they engage with a text. So let's examine your three brains: lizard, animal, and human.

The Lizard Brain

The limbic cortex is the part of the brain where emotion and mood happens, the system in charge of primal feelings fear and hunger and lust. Some people call this

"The Lizard Brain" because the limbic cortex is just about all a lizard has in terms of brain function. When you see a scary movie and the hairs rise up on the back of your neck, that's the lizard brain saying, "Um, maybe we should get out of here before the dude with the chainsaw comes back." When you are playing a sport and you feel the blood pounding in your temples and your muscles all a-twitch, that's the lizard brain saying, "It's game time, suckers!" When you are at a party and you lock eyes with an attractive someone across the room and you get that swirly feeling in your stomach, that's the lizard brain saying—well, you get the picture.

The Animal Brain

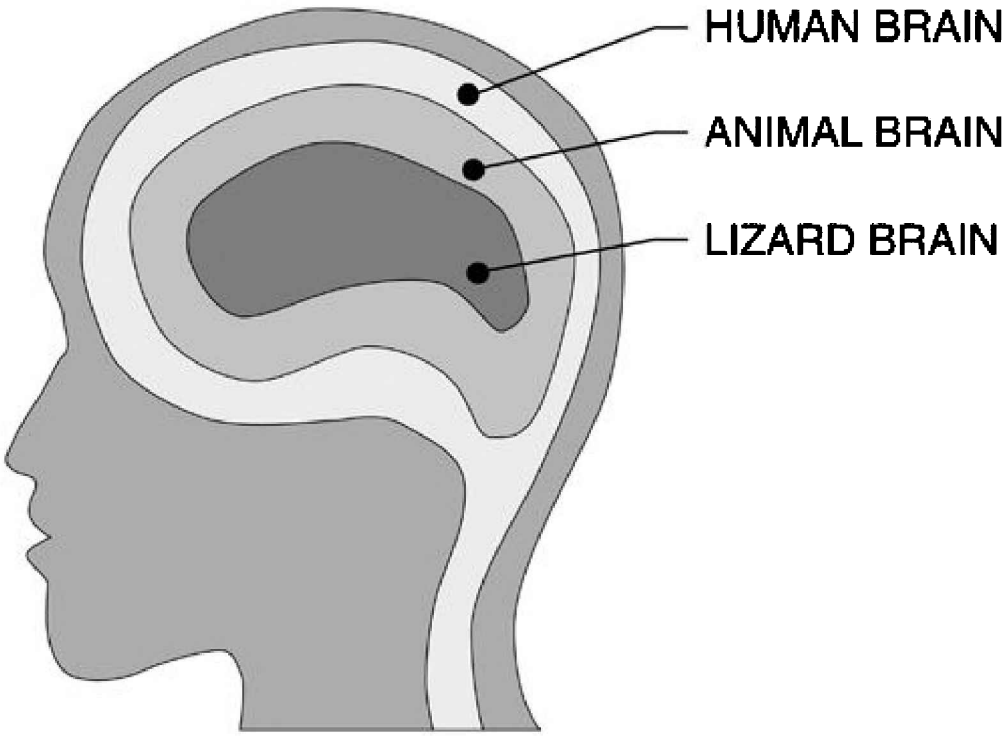
Wrapped around the lizard brain is the animal brain (not really; this is a metaphor), the part of the brain that tells us what to do when we feel the emotional surges in our lizard brain. When you are scared, you make decisions about how to proceed: do you flee in terror or do you rise up with both fists to take on that chainsaw killer? When you are at bat and the pitcher winds up, you watch the ball and decide whether you will swing, how hard you will swing, or whether you will lean into the pitch and try to get on base the easy (and painful) way. The animal brain reacts to stimuli from the lizard brain and starts to make decisions and plans in response to base desires and emotions.

The Human Brain

The outermost layer of the brain is the human brain, the part that is all about creating order and finding logical connections in the world. It's where you collect the data the world gives you for interpretation and use them to figure out how to take action. What is to be gained by fighting versus fleeing Leatherface? What tools do you need for such a fight? Is he chasing you or running away? Maybe he just needs a hug?

Or in the case of reading a poem, what does it mean?

Sometimes a poem can be too straightforward, perhaps so simple that it has only one meaning, in which case we might say that the poem is too human-brained, stuck in a mindset of telling a logical story or creating associations that become too obvious by the poem's end. If a poem is too lizard-brained, it might need some way to ground the poem so that the reader understands what to do with the sensory information or imagery. Some poems are deliberately more lizard-brained than others, while others use the human brain to do most of their work—these things are not absolutes, nor are they mutually exclusive in any particular poem. But they can be helpful in thinking about what kind of meaning a reader is getting from a poem. Human brain and lizard brain—generally speaking, a poem needs both.



When something in a poem moves a reader emotionally, that's the lizard brain at work, responding viscerally to an image or phrase. Part of a poem's goal is to reach the lizard brain, but that's not always easy to do. The animal brain is between the human and lizard brains and it keeps them apart so they don't always know what the other is doing or feeling. If the human and lizard brains were in contact, finding meaning in poems would be so easy to do. We would more easily see the connections between things and the emotional value they have in poems.

All of this doesn't mean that we are back to square one where poems are undecipherable things that refuse to give us information. No, on the contrary—if we are armed with a way of articulating how meaning operates in a poem, in terms of both how a writer creates it and how a reader interprets it, we can start to get a handle on creating a poem without having to know what everything in a poem means.

3

What Does Talent Have to Do with Anything?

Chapter Outline

Talent is the capability for hard work
Talent is the ability to muster courage
Talent is the ability to accept doubt
Talent is refusal to wait for inspiration

One of the things that work against many young writers is the notion of talent. When a teacher tells certain students that they have a talent for writing, the adjective implies that those writers have an inherent gift that makes them better writers than other people and that because those writers are special, they will not have to work as hard as others. The message is that the rest of you clowns who are not talented can never measure up to the chosen ones. Talent is a destructive concept, so let's recast the word to mean something of value to all writers.

Talent is the capability for hard work

There is a German word that all writers should know: *Sitzfleisch*. Loosely translated, the word means *the ability to sit on one's buttocks and persevere in a tedious activity*—obviously a great quality for a writer to have.

Writing is hard, and there is no arguing with that. It's lonely work during those dark hours of the night when it's just you pecking away at the keyboard furiously until you fall asleep or run out of coffee. There's no one else with you on the page except the people you have made up and the phrases you have concocted to represent them. A poem will go well for a while, but everything will go south without warning and then your friends start texting you—you know, the people

who wanted you to go out with them this night, but you told them you had to work, and they smiled as though they understood but really they rolled their eyes and went on their way to revel at a party or a tavern somewhere while you sat in front of your computer eating stale snacks and wishing that you could be doing anything else but writing. Anything at all.

Sounds awful, right? Why would anyone pursue a life like this?

Writing is supposed to be fun, and often it is—a writer is always involved in a kind of serious play with the elements of poetry. Often, however, the process can become tedious—yeah, maybe you will receive a gift once in awhile, a poem that comes to you fully formed and ready to go. However, such gifts are rare, and sometimes when you look at those poems again the next morning, you'll realize that what seemed like a precious statuette is missing an ear or has a big crack running down the side. Mostly, writing is lots of time spent between the writer and the page, time that can sometimes be more frustrating than it is exhilarating. A writer has to be able to exercise their *Sitzfleisch*. They sit in the chair and write because that's what writers do.

Talent is the ability to muster courage

It takes a brave person to write poems. First of all, it takes courage to walk into Thanksgiving dinner with the family, and when your grandfather asks you what you're doing with your life, you reply, "I want to write poetry."

More than that, though, poetry demands that a writer be vulnerable to the world and allow that vulnerability to appear on the page. Sometimes, in the midst of writing a poem, a writer might discover a difficult truth about themselves, about someone they care for, or about the world. When this happens, it's always tempting to look away toward something easier to write about, but writers have nerves of steel, or at least they act as if they do. It's a brave thing for a writer to sit down and write about difficult material—and not just brave but incredibly generous to share that material with a reader. Without that bravery and generosity, a poem can lack density or gravity or a sense that it is significant.

Additionally, it takes courage to share poems with other people, as we do in a creative writing workshop. Even a poem about the most innocuous of topics is still a representation of you as a writer. It is scary to share this thing you made with readers and to listen to them talk about it, but poems are made to be read. Letting a poem go can be difficult, but that's what poets do every time they hand a poem to a reader or submit it for publication.

Courage might appear in the form of a writer walking into a poem with nothing but a title or a beginning and trusting the writing process to get them through to the other side with something that resembles a poem. This requires a poet to learn to

trust in themselves and in the writing process. This trust is not easy to acquire, nor easy to hold onto once acquired, but it's what poets must have.

Talent is the ability to accept doubt

There are times when a writer questions their ability to be a writer, times when they wonder if there is something better they should be doing with their time, if they have the discipline to work hard enough to create a great piece of art. Or they worry that they simply don't have the chops to be writer.

This is normal. Writers are supposed to struggle with the words on the page—if it were easy, it might not be worth doing. Writers are supposed to feel uneasy when they share their work because of all the hard work and courage they have expended in writing process. Writers are supposed to feel doubt because this writing gig is hard when there is suddenly an audience where there was once just the sound of a keyboard and an empty room. Writers are supposed to feel uneasy because they have this idea of what the poem is supposed to look like in their head and it never exactly matches the poem that ends up on the page. Get used to the feeling of doubt in your gut and embrace it as part of being a writer. Use your doubt to help you reflect on how your poems might work more efficiently or how they might better have the desired effect on the reader.

Sure, there are writers who claim they don't experience doubt, writers who say they know it all and that if someone doesn't like their work, then that someone doesn't recognize greatness. This kind of writer has shut down and is no longer open to growing as a writer. It's not that they don't doubt, but they have suppressed that feeling to the point that they can't use it to see their writing more clearly.

So when you feel doubt, that's just a reminder that there is this thing called writing that you care about quite deeply. You care. That's okay. It's a good thing, even.

Talent is refusal to wait for inspiration

In the old days, people chalked talent up to supernatural forces, the most well known of which are the Greek Muses: the nine daughters of Zeus who presided over inspiration in the arts, sciences, and literature. This trickled down over the aeons to a romantic notion that an artist waits to be inspired to create because great art comes from divine inspiration.

Nowadays, we pretty much agree that the Muses are creatures of myth, yet many people complain that they cannot write a poem because they are waiting for inspiration. Really, this is just an excuse to avoid sitting down to do the hard work

of writing a poem. To rely on inspiration for a poem is to wait around until writing the poem seems easier, and it isn't likely to get any easier without sitting down to write.

Rather than wait for inspiration, a writer should be out looking for inspiration, actively seeking out the things they want to write about, the things they simply must write about. The se can be big worldly things like injustice and equality perpetrated against marginalized groups or the effects of violence on citizens of war-torn countries, but they can just as easily be more personal topics such as a favorite television show or a neighbor's dog—the important thing is that the world is out there just waiting to offer up inspiration. All a writer needs is the willingness to seek it out.

So let's not abandon talent as a word that positively describes a writer—we don't have to do that. Instead, let's use it to describe qualities that are truly admirable and not subjective or arbitrary. It's okay to be called talented, but let it describe your discipline, fearlessness, and knowledge rather than offer an imprecise measure of innate ability.

4

Where Do Poems Come From?

Chapter Outline

Writer's block is a myth
Our obsessions, our interests
Writing from prompts
Form versus content
Imitation as invention

Where to start? *How* to start? These are perhaps the most vexing questions for young poets, indeed for all poets. That unforgiving blankness of the blank page or computer screen taunts us as we stare into its void, wishing a poem would somehow appear there. Wishing won't get much written, alas. What we need is some kind of spark.

The good news is that there are ways to seek out that spark other than waiting for that divine inspiration we just debunked in the previous chapter. There are exercises you can give yourself, habits you can develop, practical approaches to writing a poem that will work a good deal better than waiting for a poem to arrive gift-wrapped by the muses.

Writing is a muscle that you strengthen through repetition. It never gets easy, but it absolutely gets easier.

Writer's block is a myth

Yes, writer's block is a myth. It's an excuse. Now, this is not to suggest that writing isn't hard, or that we all don't go through periods of time when we're writing less than we'd like to be. But writer's block is a label we use to let ourselves off the hook for not writing. There is no concrete, tangible block in our

path. There are only the usual fears about not being good enough, about not being able to write the poem we want to write.

The first step to overcoming these fears is to focus initially on the process of writing, not the product of writing. When you're already thinking about the final version of a poem, it can be all but impossible to write the first words. So, at first, do not worry about what the poem will be when it's finished. Focus, rather, on the process. On good writing habits. On the best practices of successful writers.

Writing poetry works best when it's a daily or near-daily practice. The more frequently you write poems, the more you find yourself open to poems. If you know all day that you're going to write a poem in the evening, you find yourself spending the day looking for subject matter, for images or phrases or details that you can repurpose later in your writing. You become a better observer of the world, in other words, and that's one of the most important things a writer can be.

Many poets carry a notebook for jotting down stray lines that cross their mind during the day, for recording overheard scraps of conversation, for making lists of sights seen, sounds heard, smells and sensations encountered. These are the small details that fill our hours and make up our lives, and for many people, they pass away without much thought being paid to their passing. But when you're an active poet, ever alert for material, you must seize these details, make note of them, remember them, use them, dress them up and send them back out into the world in your poems.

It's a simple matter of *paying attention*. The more you pay attention to the world around you, the more you'll have to write about.

Our obsessions, our interests

Another note about gathering subject matter: You already have most of what you need to write about in your heart and brain anyway. Young poets often think they need to write about preapproved "poetic" topics, which usually means lofty and abstract concepts like love and grief, or important-seeming subjects such as Greek mythology or classical music or daffodils. Of course we do sometimes write about these things, but there is by no means a list of topics that belong in poetry and another list of topics that do not. It is the twenty-first century, and we should write about the world we live in. That means Wonder Woman, Mountain Dew commercials, Wikipedia, and real estate pitches belong in our poems just much as the activities of the royal English court belonged in the poems of Alexander Pope or John Dryden. The world around us provides us with the language we hear and speak and breathe in on a daily basis; this language then is the foundation of our poems.

Besides, you should write about the things that interest you. Indulge your

obsessions. If you love the spectacle and drama of professional wrestling, you should write poems centered on professional wrestling. If you grew up listening to heavy metal music and Slash's guitar solos make you weak with nostalgia, then by all means, your poems should explore those topics, those memories, those emotions. Whether your passion is for baseball, scrapbooking, autograph collecting, photography, romantic comedies, *Doctor Who*, or whatever else, there is a place for that in your poems. Poems exist to make sense of the things that matter most to us, right? Don't be self-conscious about what you love; embrace it. Write it.

Writing from prompts

Here's a word in favor of writing from prompts, or exercises, or assignments. It might feel a little artificial, right? Like cheating somehow, to have written a poem about your mother and the sunset over Lake Michigan not merely because you were moved to do so, but because you were given an assignment to write a poem about your mother and the sunset over Lake Michigan. Here's a secret: We poets all give ourselves assignments all of the time.

There are a couple of reasons for this. One, it works. It certainly works a good deal better than never writing a poem until we are specifically moved to do so. That works sometimes, but it means an awful lot of time spent in between poems, more waiting than writing. Two, it can sometimes get boring, writing only the poems you have in your head already. An assignment is a way of getting outside of yourself. If you say, "Okay, I'm going to write a poem where every line starts with either the letter A or a color, and I have to include a watermelon and a sidewalk and a piece of dialogue I overhear at the coffee shop while I'm writing," you have no idea where that poem is going to end up. It's a great way to surprise yourself.

Chances are, if you're using this textbook in a class, your teacher is going to offer you prompts for at least some of your poems. Don't resist the prompts; embrace them. To go back to that initial spark we're always looking for to get us started, to turn the kindling of our daily lives into the fire of a poem, think of the prompt as the flint to the steel of your own ideas. Striking them together is the quickest way to start the fire you're after.

Another thing about writing prompts is that they offer a writer constraints. That complete freedom to let the poem go wherever it ends up wanting to go is at once both the greatest and most frustrating thing about writing poems. In offering the poet some restrictions, the prompt also provides the writer with some guidance. Write a poem that seems like it's about to make rhymes, but never actually does. Write a poem that talks back to the next song you hear on the radio. Write a poem that contains a horse, a body part, and something on your television. Sure, a prompt

can take options away from a writer, but it also offers a writer the challenge to make art out of the ingredients that have been offered.

If you're not in a class, find another poet and make up assignments for each other. There are also lots of places to find writing prompts online, and there are books and books devoted to writing prompts. And you can always make them up for yourself, too.

Form versus content

As you're seeking out prompts to get you started on a poem, bear in mind that the best prompts often push more on form than on content. That is, they offer some kind of structure around which you drape whatever ideas or subject matter you like. This makes sense, because often when we're struggling with getting started, it's not a matter of not knowing what to write about, but not knowing how to write it. Of all the infinite shapes of all the poems in the world, how do you even begin? It can be exceedingly helpful, then, when a prompt offers you scaffolding.

T. S. Eliot wrote, "When forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost—and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom the work is likely to sprawl." The kind of constraint provided by a meaningful prompt or poetry assignment offers just this framework. We often do our best work when we're pushing against something, fighting with the difficult or uncomfortable part of a writing challenge.

Imitation as invention

Here's a straightforward truth: We learn to make art by copying what previous artists have done. We learn to write poems by reading successful poems and imitating them. Imitation, conscious or not, is a necessary part of our development as an artist, a writer, a poet. We must learn to read before we learn to write; everything we read teaches us what it is possible to write. When you ask published authors about their motivations and inspirations, their answers inevitably come back to reading.

Some beginning writers defiantly suggest that they don't like to read for fear that reading what others have done will somehow damage their own work, will make their work too derivative, will push them away from originality. They're wrong. Famed horror author Stephen King says, "If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that." He's right. To write poems in the twenty-first century is to join a conversation that has been ongoing for as long as our species has been gathering in groups. How can you join that conversation if you have no idea what has been said before? These beginning writers who avoid

reading tend to produce work that is, to the contrary of their intentions, unoriginal and familiar.

An essential part of your growth as a writer and poet is to learn to read as a poet reads. That is, read to steal. Read to borrow. Read to grow. Read with an open mind. Do not be quick to dismiss. Read against your taste; seek out work that makes you uncomfortable; seek out poems you know you could never write. The act of reading, like the act of writing, should be playful, creative, energetic. For a poet, it's important to be catholic, small C, in your tastes. Expansive. To appreciate widely. The easiest thing in the world is to be snobbishly dismissive of things we do not like. But what good does that do us? How does that make us smarter, or better thinkers, or better poets? It does not.

Every poem you read offers its own argument about what a poem is, what it can be. Each poem offers a model for you to use in your own work. That's part of the reason for the poems that appear in this book: to offer you models. When we learn to speak, we learn by imitating the sounds of those speaking to us. Painters learn technique by copying from the work of the masters. So, too, in writing poetry, we learn by imitating the poems we read. Eventually, the goal is for the original source to fall away; what's left is yours and yours alone. You start by copying and end by writing.

5

What Does It Mean to Be a Poet?

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means that you think like a writer. You work at being perceptive and look for beauty wherever you can find it, even when that beauty is hideous. Writers travel through the world with their eyes open not just looking for material to write about, but for material they can attempt to understand through their writing. This could be something about nature or politics or human relationships, but it could also be something like the patch of rust on your father's old car or the way your sister sits in the living room by herself after a long day of work at the auto plant. Civilians don't think like writers, so they don't always understand how the world is always offering up poems to be written. But you do.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means solitude. Writing is an activity usually done solo, whether it's in the middle of the day or in the tiny hours of the morning. You might try to go to a coffee shop, but even there you are by yourself while you write. There will be those evenings when your friends call you and invite you to a party or a dance club or a luncheon, and you'll decline because you have this poem you are working on and you're afraid that if you look away from it for too long, it will wriggle free and escape before you have a chance to finish it. Your friends won't understand unless they are writers. Screenwriter Lawrence Kasdan famously said that being a writer is rather like having homework every night for the rest of your life. Alas, it's true.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means that you are part of a community, whether you know it or not. People who think like writers have a common experience with the world and can come together and connect through writing. It's like being into the same sports but without so much territorial smacktalk. You can find a writing community in creative writing workshops, in book groups, in classes at school. Or you can open up the pages of a

literary journal to see who has their poems published inside. Or look at the books on the shelves of your local bookstore, books full of poems that were once written on scraps of paper in someone's wallet or in a spiral notebook at the bottom of someone's backpack—poems just like yours. All those people think like you. They are your tribe. Go find them. They want to be found.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means you are part of a tradition. Shakespeare wrote poems. So did Sappho, Lord Byron, Emily Dickinson, and Edgar Allen Poe. Today, people still write poems: Oliver de la Paz, Kaveh Akbar, Natalie Diaz, Natasha Trethewey—all people in the anthology portion of this book. When you write poems, you are entering into the tradition of poetry and the conversations about the world that poetry has created and perpetuated since the world's first line break. Contemporary poems are different from the poems of yesteryear, in terms of both form and content, but the poems you write today are your conduit to the writers of the past and the writers of the future.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means everything. You wouldn't ask lightning why it sparks a fire in dry tinder. No one asks water why it flows to the lowest point in the road. To be a poet means that you have an uncontrollable urge to make things with words, poems that say things we want to say, poems that tickle the brains and hearts and bellies of people we want to reach. Being a poet means you have these things that you can do with words and you can't stop doing those things without ending up in jail or in rehab or at a dead-end job where your soul is slowly crushed. You've never asked what it means to be a poet because you can't imagine being anything else.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means nothing. There is nothing but the poem and the writer doesn't matter. You spend your time working on poems in pursuit of finding purity in the world through language, and in the end the art you create is all that matters. And there are lots of other people too, other writers who are like you, crafting language into art. It's a higher calling, remaking the world anew every time you sit down to write a poem, and it's a gift to be able to share that calling with your fellow writers as well as your readers. Being a writer means that you privilege the poem over your own ego because a poem has to live beyond the person who created it in order to be a beautiful thing.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means you get to be yourself. It means that you get to express yourself as an individual in the world, your worldview, your emotions, and your thoughts all on

the page to let everyone know that you are you. The world is an immense and busy place where you are just one of millions of people. The universe is even more immense and busier with little time for inconsequential things. But here, in the poem, you are you.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means you get to be other people. You can always be you, but sometimes putting on a mask is more fun. You can be Batman, Benjamin Franklin, or Beyoncé. You can be a soldier fighting overseas or a college student or a stay-at-home-dad or any combination of these things. Adopting a persona can be like pulling on a mask—you aren't you, so you are free to do all sorts of things you wouldn't otherwise feel comfortable doing. But really—it's you under that mask and no one has to know.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means you are a citizen of your city, your state, and your country. It means that you are a citizen of the world and you see all sorts of things happening that you cannot ignore: war, oppression and tyranny—you are witness to these things and your poems strive to bring readers' eyes to them as well. You cannot cure the world's pain, but your poems can be active in the world to demand that people pay attention to the many different ways that the world works. Your poems demand that people look at the world, that people bear witness to what is happening.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means you are an activist because art and activism pair well together. Metaphor is your sword, the line break is your bow and arrow, and there are dragons out in the world for you to fight. Poems are about the human experience, and where the human experience is threatened, it is the poet's duty to step in with words, and in doing so, rally others to your cause.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means you have empathy. You are sensitive to the emotions and experiences of people whose experiences and worldviews might be different from your own. It can be difficult to figure out how to walk in another person's shoes and try to understand their liv es and how they think about the world, but you can try to do so in your poems. Despite differences, you are drawn to finding commonality with others through our shared participation in the act of being human. You can't ignore this.

What does it mean to be a poet?

It means you read. Voraciously, widely, deeply. You read poetry, fiction, nonfiction. You read news stories and soup-can labels, cereal boxes, and Tumblr

threads. You read writing that soothes you and writing that makes you uncomfortable. Writing that speaks to your beliefs about the world and writing that expands your beliefs about the world. You read to make yourself a better writer, but also to make yourself a better person. You read with an open mind and an open heart.

What does it mean to be a poet?

In the end, the answer to this question is simple: it means you read poems and you write poems. So go.

Section II

The Elements of Poetry

6

Rhetorical Construction

Chapter Outline

Logos
Rhetorical devices
Pathos

Simply put, rhetoric is the art of persuasion. A writer uses language deliberately in order to inform, instruct, or persuade an audience to a particular way of thinking or to spur them into action. The study of rhetoric goes back at least to Aristotle, who was thinking about effects of language more than 2,000 years ago. Language is deployed rhetorically everywhere around you: television commercials, magazine advertisements, political speeches and piano lessons—it's all over the place. Thinking about language rhetorically is an important aspect of understanding how poems work on the page.

It is helpful to see poems as rhetorical constructions because it pushes the poet to consider the work poems do, and because it provides helpful vocabulary for describing *how* poems do that work. As you become comfortable articulating how poems work, you will discover a greater variety of choices available when you sit down to write poems. A poet isn't just putting words on the page haphazardly to express emotions. Rather, the poet carefully constructs a text built to appeal to the audience's sense of logic, emotion, and values. This is the rhetorical triangle, the points of which are logos, pathos, and ethos.

Logos

A common complaint about poetry is that people sometimes find poems difficult to understand, so perhaps a good place to start in response is to say yes—poems can

be difficult to understand. Partly, this is because most people are more used to reading prose, which is typically bound by logic and framed in rhetorical structures aimed at explanation and providing systems of evidence-based claims and proof. Because the majority of textual communications happen in prose, this has become the default expectation for how readers set about finding meaning in a text.

A discussion of logos generally addresses how facts and logic are used in a text. Writers create authority for themselves and about their subjects through a careful, precise use of data and a system of logical statements and proofs to make their argument clear to their audience. When readers look for meaning in a text, they are most often focused on how the writer has used logos to deliver information in a way that creates a convincing message.

This is why so many people find poetry difficult: readers are used to looking for facts and logic to drive a text, but poems often create their own logic, which may be counter to what readers have learned to expect from prose. Often poems make a statement and then make a leap to some other seemingly unrelated subject. Some poems will forsake logic in favor of repetition, rhythm, voice, and language, privileging these elements over the need to provide any sort of causal system of creating meaning. Sometimes poems use faulty causality or a slippery slope argument, and sometimes they outright contradict themselves, making a statement and then reversing that statement a few lines later. Poems often omit the words that make clear the logical connections between ideas: “In conclusion,” “as a result,” “which leads us to”—these phrases are at home in prose but quite out of place in most poems.

So when you sit down to write a poem, there’s no need to adhere to the logos as we understand it from our reading of prose. Logic is the realm of the human brain but sometimes the goal of the poet is to expand a poem’s possibilities beyond the potential logical structures—or illogical structures, as the case may be—that will take the poem into interesting and unknown territories.

Rhetorical devices

A poem’s logos is, in essence, a system of rhetorical devices aimed at engaging the reader. Here is a rundown of common terms that describe the moves poems often make.

Allusion: A reference to something outside the poem, usually of cultural or historical significance.

Archaism: The use of old or outdated conventions or diction in a poem. This could take the form of simple rhymes and rhyme schemes, sentences that are written to sound “poetic,” or just a lot of forsooths and hences.

Anthropomorphism: The attribution of human traits or qualities to animals or inanimate objects.

Colloquialism: An expression or phrase that is informal or conversational, belonging more to the realm of spoken language than written language. This also includes slang and regional dialects.

Didacticism: The idea that a poem should contain information and instructions for the reader, especially morally. In contemporary poetry, didacticism is generally considered a negative trait.

Framing: The encapsulation of one thing inside another. Like a story within a story, except we're talking about poetry here.

Hyperbole: Exaggeration! Overstatement!

Idiom: A phrase commonly used for its figurative meaning, though its literal meaning might not be obvious without context. *It's raining cats and dogs, best thing since sliced bread,* etc.

Irony, Dramatic: A scenario where the reader knows more about a given situation than do the characters involved in a narrative.

Irony, Situational: A scenario where what happens is the opposite of what is expected.

Irony, Verbal: An expression that means something different (usually the opposite) of what is said.

Juxtaposition: Placing one thing next to another for comparison and/or contrast. The close proximity forces readers to create associative meanings. One thing takes on the value of the other thing next to it. You can place an eagle next to a soldier and they can exchange values. The eagle becomes an insignia of war, while the soldier receives the majesty and sovereignty of the eagle.

Kenning: A two-part figure of speech that appears often as a hyphenated word offered in place of a thing's literal name. The sun is a *sky-candle*, the moon is a *night-eye*, and snowfall is *winter's curtains*.

Metonymy: Representation of a thing by that with which it is closely associated. The eagle represents the United States. The Bear represents Russia—or California, depending on where you live. The White House represents the executive branch of the US government.

Mimesis: The imitation and interpretation of reality in a piece of art through portrayal of things as they appear in the real world. Characters might behave in ways that correspond to actual human behaviors, nature might appear in ways that reflect real-world locations that are recognizable to the reader. Through this representation, the reader can believe and sometimes participate in the reality created by the poem.

Non Sequitur: A thought or statement that is an illogical leap from that which precedes it.

Onomatopoeia: Pow! Rattle! Words that imitate the sounds they represent. Zonk! Whoosh! Zing! Buzz!

Oxymoron: A two-word contradictory figure of speech in which the first word negates the second by having opposite meanings. Listen to the *deafening silence*. That is such an *original cliché*.

Paradox: An impossible reality that appears to be true.

Parallelism: A figure of speech in which consecutive sentences or phrases have

identical grammatical constructions. This is the first sentence, and it looks like this. This is the second sentence, and it's built nearly the same.

Personification: The representation of an abstract quality as having a human form. Uncle Sam is the personification of the United States. Rosie the Riveter is the personification of the strength of American women during the Second World War. The grim reaper is the personification of death.

Prose: Text not written in verse. It is built into sentences and paragraphs for everyday use.

Prose poem: A poem written in prose rather than verse.

Prosody: The patterns of sound and rhythm in a poem and the study thereof.

Pun: A joke driven by a situation in which a word has multiple meanings, both of which make sense.

Satire: The use of extreme exaggeration and irony to expose and ridicule human folly and/or corruption. Often, satire is humorous, but it always attacks its target.

Superimposition: To lay one thing over another in such a way that both are still visible. One image can overlap with another by laying qualities of one thing over the second. If you have an image of a bird and an image of a boy you can superimpose the bird over the boy by giving him feathers, literally or figuratively.

Syllogism: A rhetorical device that applies deductive reasoning to a series of statements in order to arrive at a logical conclusion. Aristotle's famous example goes like this:

All men are mortal,

Socrates is a man,

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Note that poems are not bound to strict deductive reasoning—a poem can use the syllogism in its classic form to come to a logical conclusion, or the poem can forsake logic and move toward an illogical deduction.

Synecdoche: Representation of a thing by one of its parts. A bird is represented by a wing or a feather, an automobile by its steering wheel or its snow tires.

Synesthesia: The mixing or confusion of the five senses.

Trope: A commonly used theme or rhetorical device. A secret identity is a common superhero trope. A walk in the woods is a common nature poetry trope.

Verisimilitude: The quality of appearing true to life.

Verse: A poetic composition, any grouping of words into a poetic form. (Often used to refer to lineated poems, as opposed to prose poems.)

Pathos

Pathos is an appeal to the emotions of the audience. Nearly every movie and television show ever made is geared to make the audience laugh, cry, or feel pain. Many of the most famous speeches contain appeals to logic powered by the credible character of the speaker. Dr. Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan—these orators deliver arguments based on logic and character, yet

their speeches are driven in great part by the way they inspire and call to action through an appeal to emotions. Through pathos, a prose writer uses emotional language to establish common ground by appealing to common systems of morality and values.

Readers of prose are used to parsing out the text's logos; however, a poem's aim is often to create pathos for the reader. If logos is the realm of the human brain, then pathos is its counterpart in the lizard brain, as poems appeal to our base desires and emotions. If the purpose of logos is to move the reader from the poem's beginning to its end, then the purpose of pathos is to move the reader internally—logos moves the reader's eyes across the page and pathos moves the reader's heart or stomach at the end, leaving them feeling all squishy inside.

Ethos

Ethos is an aspect of rhetoric that is largely about character and how writers portray themselves on the page through persona. Whenever we write, we strive for credibility with our readers, an attribute which depends greatly on the situation. A student writing a paper for class might want to appear hardworking, intelligent, and engaged with the course content. A person writing a letter to ask their parents for a loan might want to appear desperate yet responsible and definitely loving and respectful toward their family. A person writing a note to ask for a date might want to come across as being fun to hang out with for a couple of hours, at least. When the text manages to create a credible persona for the reader, we say that the text has achieved "high ethos."

Ethos appears in poems in a couple of different ways, the first being the intent of the writer. If the poem is hateful or tries to injure someone emotionally or spiritually, then the writer's intent might come into doubt. Poems attempt to build empathy with their subjects; poems that lack empathy cannot create connections with the reader. This kind of ethics is important to writers, not in the sense that everyone has to come from the same moral foundation or write with the same point of view, but more that without creating empathy, the poem risks being unable to emotionally connect with the reader.

Sometimes, the poem's purpose is to convey an ethical belief in a way that the reader can experience it as an emotional response. Protest poems, for example, often exist in opposition to a person, government, or ideal. The poem attempts to transform ideology into emotion—the ideology is felt by the reader emotionally, which delivers the poem's ethical informa tion. "The Gun Joke" by Jamaal May, (253) for example, plays with the language of jokes, but as the reader progresses through the poem, it becomes apparent that there is no joke here. The poem resists being funny, and combined with our expectation of humor, delivers the poem's

ethical information.

Every poem has a speaker, which is different from saying that every poem has a writer. In creating a speaker, the poem's voice takes on a persona that may not be the same as that of the writer. That voice might be ironic or passionate or self-deprecating—whatever the quality it takes on, the voice is what delivers logos and pathos information to readers in a way that they can receive and understand it.

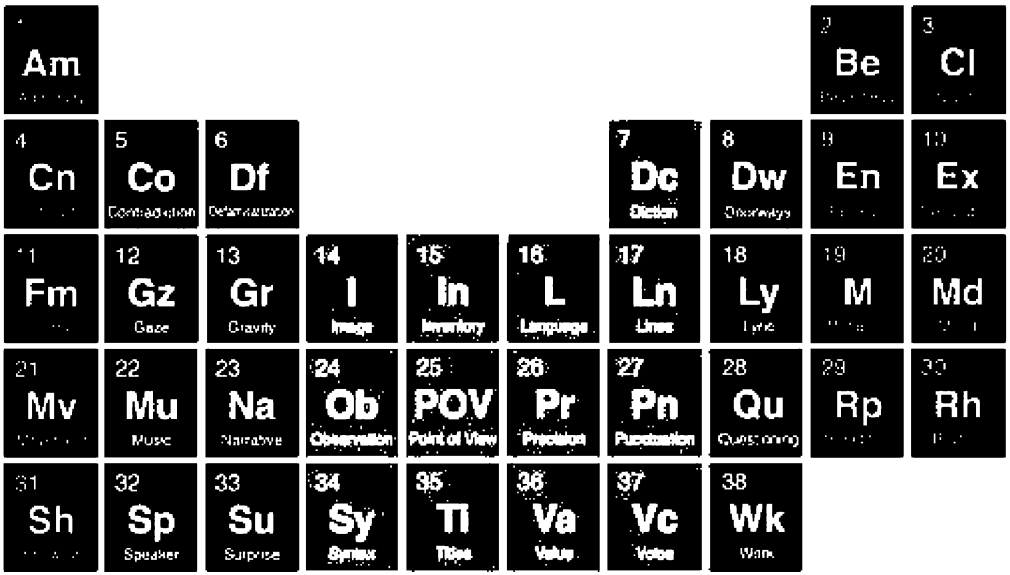
* * *

These three points—logos, pathos, and ethos—make up the foundation of the poem's rhetorical construction. Some poems might seem to be rooted more in logos while others seem to lean more heavily on pathos. Still others might seem to be more interested in creating characters and exploring the mind of a particular speaker than anything logical or emotional. Regardless of how they appear to be working, however, poems always use all three.

For example, Patricia Lockwood's poem "Rape Joke" (176–9) seems to be very much grounded in logos. It offers those end-stopped lines and unlineated paragraphs that convey information about and reactions to sexual assault. It almost appears as though we are reading prose. Yet, the poem also asks the reader to walk in the shoes of a rape survivor with the use of the second person point of view. This in turn creates the poem's ethos—by walking with (or *as*) the survivor, we are asked to experience the life of the survivor as figures in the poem deny and make light of the experience of sexual assault. The poem goes on and on relentlessly until the reader is ready for the poem to end. But it doesn't end—that's part of the poem's pathos, the emotional weight that the reader cannot escape. Taken one step further, the reader can walk away from the poem, shut the book without reading to the end, but for the survivor, there is no escape. If you can see the rhetorical triangle at work in the poem, you should be able to see how the poem has been built to elicit an emotional response and create empathy for rape survivors who live in a culture that forgets about sexual assault or refuses to take the experiences of survivors seriously.

7

The Elements of Poetry



Chapter Outline

Ambiguity
Beginnings
Clarity
Concision
Contradiction
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Form
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Point of View
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Punctuation
Questioning
Repetition
Rhythm
Showing and Telling
Speaker
Surprise
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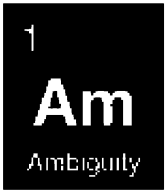
Work

In ancient Greece, people believed that the universe was composed of four elements: air, earth, fire, and water, which were the essential parts of all matter. Eventually Plato added aether because the heavens couldn't possibly be made of any earthly material. This concept of breaking down the world into elements is common in other cultures too. The five elements in Japan are similar to that of the Greeks, except that aether is replaced by the void, and it's a system that is similar to others in India, Egypt, and Tibet. The Chinese Wu Xing describes five energies: fire, water, earth, metal, and wood.

In the modern day, people in the West generally no longer conceive of the world

being broken up into a system of four or five basic elements. Instead, there is a more complex system of explaining the fabric of the universe: the periodic table. The number of elements changes as new elements are discovered and added to the periodic table, which arranges the elements into groups that all share similar chemical characteristics.

What follows are 38 elements of poetry as we have conceived them. These elements are building blocks of poems, and they are also essential characteristics that make poems work on the page. The poem is a rhetorical construction, and the elements of poetry are the things that help the poet connect with the audience and deliver a full reading experience, working all three points of the rhetorical triangle along the way. They present both ways of approaching the writing of a particular poem and ways of thinking about how poems work in the abstract. The specific function of each element will likely be a bit different from poem to poem. Don't worry too much about reading them straight through from start to finish. Instead, skip around from element to element to see what might be helpful to you in thinking about your poems, and as you do so, consider that poem you are working on: how might engaging with a particular element help you engage with your audience?



Ambiguity

If someone asks you what happened at a city commission meeting or what your favorite sushi restaurant is, writing a poem would be a weird way to respond. That's because a poem is not the best way to straightforwardly deliver information. If you want to efficiently communicate information, your best bet is a clearly written memo with simple sentences and bulleted lists to organize the content.

Your clearly written memo is crafted specifically to avoid ambiguity. To deliver a particular meaning with as little doubt as possible.

A poem is up to something else entirely.

Language is slippery. Interpretation is idiosyncratic. Every reader will bring their own life experiences, their own vocabulary, their own opinions and associations to bear on every word you write. The word "dog" brings to mind a different dog for every reader: a yellow lab, a greyhound, a Chihuahua, the mutt who greeted you at the front door every afternoon after school for your entire childhood.

The poet's task is not to fight this inherent ambiguity, but to embrace it. Revel in it. Explore it. Take advantage of it. A poet must dive into exactly those places in the language where meaning is slipperiest, where uncertainty is inevitable.

Language is not the same as experience. The words for things are not the things. Just as a painting of a pipe is not the pipe itself, a poem about love is not love. A poem about loss is not loss. And yet language is our medium. Language is what we as poets have chosen to use in our attempt to make sense of the world. It is our clay, our marble, our paint, our breath and brass, our wind and reed. Instead of pretending that it is adequate to the task, a poet must acknowledge its imperfections, point out those places where language falls short, where certainty is impossible, ambiguity inevitable.

For these reasons, you'll often see contemporary poets openly acknowledge within their poems what they do not know, cannot know; places where language falls just short of what they're attempting to convey. Consider the redactions in the section of Solmaz Sharif's "Reaching Guantanamo" (250), in which Sharif literally removes language from her poem; or the moment Bob Hicok describes when the speaker of "Elegy with lies" "cannot finish that story" (189). Dean Rader's "Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry" (243–4)is full of moments in which the poem questions its own reality, including the final sentence: "Experts doubt its authenticity." These are moments where the poets acknowledge the limited ability of language to stand for truth. Yet as readers, we sense truth in these poems.

It's important for the young poet to become aware of the distinction between ambiguity and obscurity. As we mentioned in the "Proceed with Caution" chapter, it's easy for a poet to write a poem that means nothing, that is impossible for a reader to decipher. It's easy to use vague, abstract language that obscures the subject matter of your poem; it's also, in the end, not a great idea. So ambiguity must be *productive ambiguity*; it has to help the reader experience your poem. This is where precision comes in; even as your poem explores complex and ambiguous facets of the human experience, your language choices must remain careful, focused, and intentional.

SEE ALSO: CONTRADICTION, DICTION, LANGUAGE, METAPHOR, PRECISION, SYNTAX.

Beginnings

The most important element of a poem is how it begins. (In a few pages, we'll tell you that the most important element is how a poem ends, but for now, we want you to believe that how it begins matters more.)

The beginning of a poem does essential work. There is much required of a poem's first few lines. A reader comes to a poem cold, with no knowledge of the world the poem is observing or interpreting, with no sense of the poem's mood or tone or sense of syntax, with no preconceptions about the journey they're about to undertake. Working in conjunction with the title, the poem's first few lines establish what has been called a "lyrical contract" with the reader. Readers are smart; they pick up on everything. Within those first few words, readers begin to determine not only what world the poem is creating, but also the poet's stance toward that world. That shapes the reader's relationship with the rest of the poem.

Once the lyrical contract is in place, the reader expects it will be fulfilled. It would be exceedingly strange for a poem that opens with the speaker declaring, "Me and Maw, we ain't seen Paw since them hens got out they cage" to end with that same speaker observing, "Once more, our nobler selves had prevailed even as we stared into the ebony abyss of our own souls." This is an extreme and rather silly example, of course, but it illustrates the importance of consistency of voice.

You are, of course, free to violate the lyrical contract. Thwarting reader expectations is part of the work poems do. But it is essential that when you do so, you do so intentionally, with full awareness both of the expectations you established and of the effects of dashing them. That means you must pay close attention to how your poem begins and what those opening lines give your reader.

The beginning of a poem must also introduce a poem's "plot," in so far as poems have plots. Think about the arc of a narrative; a story must begin with a problem, a

conflict, some sort of catalyst to kickstart the events that follow. So, too, must a poem offer a catalyst, though it need not be a narrative catalyst: an event that leads to other events. The poem must begin immediately to justify its existence, to persuade the reader to continue reading.

Look at the first three lines of Anders Carlson-Wee's "Dynamite": "My brother hits me hard with a stick / so I whip a choke-chain / across his face. We're playing . . ." (216). In these three lines, a sentence and just the first two words of the next sentences, we are dropped in medias res into a moment of high action and violence, but then quickly discover that the violence is a kind of play. The plot of the poem is set into motion; a straightforward approach to syntax is established; and we are introduced to the theme of the interplay between violence and play in the relationship between these two siblings. That's a lot of work happening in fewer than twenty words.

Narrative poems typically begin with a plot point; more meditative poems often begin by explicitly establishing that the poet is thinking about something, as in Tracy K. Smith's "I think of your hands" (212), or Matthew Olzmann's "Here's what I've got: the reasons why our marriage / might work" (203). These beginnings very quickly give us the object of contemplation and the point of view of the poet doing the contemplating—a starting place from which the poem can spiral and move in unexpected directions. Providing that concrete starting place is critical; it grounds the poem for the reader, offers at least a momentary sense of stability.

Ada Limón's "Downhearted" takes the bold opening gambit of announcing its intentions quite plainly:

> Six horses died in a tractor-trailer fire.
> There. That's the hard part. I wanted
> to tell you straight away so we could
> grieve together. (211)

Limón gives us what appears to be the central conflict of her poem—the death of these horses in a fire—and then breaks the fourth wall to address the reader directly, explaining why she started the poem with that observation. This immediately expands the project of the poem, letting the reader know that this isn't simply the story of the horses, but of the poet trying to make sense of loss. Readers are dropped directly into the world of the poem with that declarative opening sentence; then we are pulled back from that blunt fact into the mind of the poet as she tries to make sense of the fire. In this way, Limón's skillful opening establishes the poem's conflict, the tension between bad things happening and our attempts to process them.

Other poems begin more mysteriously. Traci Brimhall's "Ars Poetica" (170)

opens with an unexplained “It,” leaving us to work to figure out what the missing referent might be. Kaveh Akbar hints at violence, danger, a domestic scene interrupted with “First, setting down the glass. / Then the knives” (207). Tarfia Faizullah’s lovely opening lines—“Let me break / free of these lace-frail / lilac fingers disrobing / the black sky”—establish a lyrical sensibility and a mood more than any particular sense of plot; (175) it bears mentioning, however, that Faizullah has already given us a descriptive title and an epigraph establishing the poem’s mode, plot, and setting—thus freeing her opening lines from that duty, allowing her to move quickly into imagery and a prayerful request.

Beginnings are hard. (Everything about writing a poem is hard.) Worrying too much about catalysts and lyrical contracts can make them even harder. The worst thing is to let this paralyze you—to stare at a blinking cursor while you agonize over figuring out the perfect first lines. It’s often more important to plunge ahead and write. Getting the beginning just right is often a task for the revision process. You won’t know if the beginning is the right one until you see where the rest of the poem ends up anyway.

SEE ALSO: ENDINGS, NARRATIVE, TITLES

Clarity

This might seem a little counterintuitive, the notion of clarity as an essential element in poetry. After all, we've already pointed out that a poem is not the best mechanism for the straightforward delivery of information. The elements section begins with ambiguity, for goodness sakes, celebrating the slipperiness of language. This would seem to imply that poetry values the opposite of clarity.

And yet clarity, too, matters. Sometimes poets need to be able to say exactly what they mean. The opposite of clarity is not ambiguity or mystery, but obscurity. It's easy to obscure meaning, to write deliberately difficult-to-interpret lines of poetry. The challenge is to honor the complexity of human existence and the slipperiness of language without resorting to vague phrases or abstractions, without using your language as a blanket thrown over your subject matter.

If you look at the poems in this anthology, you'll find that there's rarely much lack of clarity regarding what a poem is *about*. Precisely what each poem means may be less than clear, and each poem has its own layers of mystery or ambiguity, but the poets are not using language to deliberately hide their topics. Sherman Alexie and Billy Collins, for example, are both quite straightforward in their poems, though both are tackling large, abstract notions such as faith and fatherhood for Alexie (195) and the very nature of poetry for Collins (169). In fact, it is the clarity and concreteness of these poems that allows the poets to explore such vast ideas. A poem about something obscure and abstract that is itself obscure and abstract will tend to drift aimlessly, leaving readers no place to stand confidently.

Even a poem as lyrical, challenging, and associative as Gary L. McDowell's "Tell Me Again About the Last Time You Saw Her" (206) is quite clear in its language use; each sentence or segment or image is on its own clear—the poem's sense of mystery comes from the juxtaposition of these moments, which readers

must interpret for themselves. In McDowell's poem and perhaps in all poems, clarity works not against ambiguity but hand in hand with it.

SEE ALSO: AMBIGUITY, CONCISION, PRECISION

Concision

Don’t waste words.

Tempting as it is to end this section there, forgive us a few thoughts on why concision is an important element in poetry. First, it’s important to note that not all poems use concision in the same way. Concision is not always the same thing as minimalism. Poems can still be expansive, lush in their language choices, even at times wordy.

Why concision? It’s part of the project of much of poetry—not all, but probably most: the stripping away of excess to get to the essence of the subject matter. For a reader, there’s great pleasure to be found in reading something that feels so carefully put together, so lovingly crafted, that not a single word could be removed or replaced. For a poet, there’s pleasure in creating such a piece.

Contrast the language choices made by Monica Youn in “Quinta del Sordo” (188) with David Kirby’s in “Teacher of the Year” (214–5). Youn’s poem is exceedingly spare and focused; Kirby’s is conversational and meandering. Youn’s poem may be more what comes to mind when we think of concision, but even so, Kirby’s poem does not waste a word. You measure concision not by word count, but by the value each word brings to the poem. Each word has work to do.

Concision is made possible by precision and closely related to clarity. The way to get the most out of each word in your poem is to ensure that each word is the best one for the job.

Sometimes you need those less-powerful connecting words: articles (a, an, the), conjunctions (and, but, or, for, so, yet), prepositions (to, for, from, etc.), and so on; like punctuation, these words help keep sentences and lines moving. But sometimes you don’t. Perhaps not in the drafting stage, when you are exploring and working merely to get words onto the page, but later, as you begin to revise,

you must interrogate each word: subject each word to a rigorous job interview to determine whether it deserves its place on the page.

Words like "however," "therefore," and the like—conjunctive adverbs—are used in prose to indicate the logical connections between ideas: to show that a clause contrasts with the preceding one, say, or is a conclusion drawn from the previous sentences. In poetry, these words should be used with caution. Most often, the poet should simply offer images and ideas and trust that the reader sees the connections between them. The act of juxtaposing two images next to each other in a poem creates the logic that binds the ideas together. There is, then, no need to spell out that logic. An argumentative essay or legalistic brief, for example, needs to leave no room for doubt, so it uses these words to hold the hand of its reader as they walk together from premise to conclusion. A poem should always leave room for doubt.

Our first drafts are almost always full of hesitations, false starts, clumsy repetitions, and overexplaining. It's natural. Some of this comes from the process of exploration we undertake as we draft a poem, still working ourselves to figure out where the heart of the poem lives. Some of it comes from our understandable desire to make sure our reader "gets it," so we explain, re-explain, and repeat ourselves. This is the writing process. What matters is that during revision, we remind ourselves to trust that our best images do not need explanation.

There's a famous line variously (and almost certainly inaccurately) attributed to Michelangelo and several other famous artists about how to create a great sculpture of say, a horse: "You start with a block of marble and remove everything that doesn't look like a horse." The poet's goal is the same.

SEE ALSO: CLARITY, PRECISION

Contradiction

One of the ways poems embrace ambiguity is by openly contradicting themselves. If the project of a poem is to explore the ways in which the world is unknowable, it's inevitable that part of that exploration includes reversal, reconsideration, contradiction. We've suggested that a poem must always be about at least two things; sometimes those two things are in opposition to each other. And yet both can exist at once. Think of how often there is laughter at a memorial service, as someone shares a fond, funny memory of the person everyone is there to mourn. That laughter might exist in contradiction to the grief, and yet both can exist simultaneously, the mind and heart capable of holding two diametrically opposed feelings at once.

The world is complex. Human experience is never just one thing. Poetry must reflect this, and sometimes that means the poet must contradict something said earlier. Natalie Diaz's "No More Cake Here" (191–2) opens with the line "When my brother died" and proceeds to explore in great detail the preparations for a memorial. But in the poem's final stanza, the brother arrives in the scene: "the worst part he said was / he wasn't even dead. I think he's right." So which is true? Is the brother dead or not? In the world outside the poem, the world we live and breathe in, both things could not be true at once. But in a poem, two contradictory truths can exist together. In this way, the poem forces the reader to experience them both at once: "each moon claiming the other false," as Gary L. McDowell writes (206). Similarly, Li-Young Lee can tell readers in a single line that "nothing and anything might make this noise" (221).

The lesson here is clear: one simple way to create ambiguity and lend your work the kind of complexity you seek is to be willing to overtly contradict yourself from time to time. Part of being a good, thoughtful human being who learns and grows

throughout life is being willing to change your mind about things; the same is true of a good, thoughtful poem.

The caution here is that the contradiction must be meaningful, complex, well-timed. Like any poetic move, it can be gimmicky if done for its own sake, or done too often. A successful contradiction means that both sides ring true. Ocean Vuong's persona poem "Of Thee I Sing" (238–9) is written from the point of view of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy experiencing the assassination of her husband. But just about halfway through the poem, we encounter this: "I'm not Jackie-O yet," which seemingly contradicts the main premise of the poem. Yet it's also true, in a couple of ways: First, we know the poem is written by Vuong, not Ms. Kennedy; second, she didn't become Jackie O until years later when she married Aristotle Onassis and changed her last name. All of these realities collide in this single line, and then the poem continues in what is clearly her voice, in that deadly moment in Dallas, and we accept that Jackie is the speaker even though we know —and have been reminded—that she is not, cannot be. The contradiction of this single line so expertly captures the complexity of this historical moment in time, and the way we experience that moment now, decades later, in history books or our memories or on archival black and white footage or in this very poem. Our relationship to the poem's truth becomes more fragile after the contradiction.

These are the moments you should be looking for when you aim to introduce contradiction into your poems: those times when you passionately believe both sides of an argument; when y ou want two things to be true at once, even if the rules of the physical world would seem to suggest they cannot.

SEE ALSO: AMBIGUITY, SURPRISE

Defamiliarization

Poetry's power comes in great part from its ability to transform one thing into another. Defamiliarization is the transformation of everyday things into something a bit stranger. The poet takes something familiar, and through playing with images, with metaphors, with changing values and other elements of poetry, creates an unfamiliar experience for the reader. This is crucial, of course, because this strangeness is an important quality in poems.

On the one hand, the strangeness that is the result of defamiliarization contributes to the idea that poems are hard to understand. Strangeness obscures meaning simply by being strange. Even if it doesn't obscure meaning, strangeness at least forces the reader to slow down and take stock of what's happening on the page. So why make the effort to move the poem out of the realm of that which is familiar and more immediately understandable?

Partly, you do this because with strangeness comes additional value, and with that additional value, the poem can have more density and more clarity at the same time. When Billy Collins says that we can drop a mouse into a poem in "Introduction to Poetry" (169), that's a moment of intense defamiliarization. The comparison is between the poem and a maze, a metaphor that posits the poem as something to lose a small animal in—the reader might be confused for a moment, but can make the connection between poem and maze with relatively little effort. The metaphor defamiliarizes the poem, but defamiliarization works in the end to bring additional value to the poem, clarifying its meaning for the reader.

The other part of why a poet might want to defamiliarize is that poetry is more fun that way. Collins presents the mouse in the maze, a leap from the beehive in the previous stanza—just one quick moment and then it's off to the maze. Then after the maze, the poem leaps again and has people looking for light switches in

the dark, an image that puts the reader in the maze along with the mice and whatever else lurks there. By leaping from stanza to stanza, from defamiliarized moment to defamiliarized moment, Collins provides us with constant surprise in the poem.

SEE ALSO: CLARITY, IMAGE, OBSERVATION AND INTERPRETATION, SURPRISE, WORK

Diction

Diction, simply put, refers to the words and phrases you choose in a piece of writing. It's natural to think of poems as having elevated diction—that is, somewhat formal or lofty—but that's not always true. In fact, most contemporary poems fight against this expectation. A poem's diction can be conversational, informal, sarcastic, gritty, raw, and, yes, even poetic. Diction is closely related to voice, and voice is determined by a poem's speaker.

Here's an illustration of the same idea rendered three different ways:

- A cold wind was blowing in the pasture.
- A frigid gale swept across the forlorn prairies.
- It was dang freezin' out there in that field.

These convey essentially the same message, but they differ widely in diction. The first is fairly straightforward, not calling attention to itself in any particular way; the second more elevated (perhaps even to the point of being pompous); and the third is more conversational and indicative of a particular speaker.

Attempts to force a particular diction on a poem can backfire. For example, if you try to spice up your vocabulary and reach for a more elevated diction by clicking the thesaurus feature in your word processor, your storm can become a squall or a tempest or a disturbance, any of which might seem more poetic but might not be the right word. Sometimes it's okay for a storm just to be a storm. Along those lines, it's risky to lower your diction deliberately as well. You don't want your speaker's voice to be a terrible Hollywood caricature of the person they're supposed to be. Throwing in "maw and paw" and a couple of "ain't"s and "y'all"s won't make your Southern characters seem more authentic; it will make them seem like cartoons and stereotypes. This, surely, is not the effect any good

poet seeks.

For most young poets, the best strategy is to start writing without worrying too much about diction. At least in first drafts, write in a voice as close to your own everyday voice as possible; use your normal vocabulary and frame of reference. As you write more and more poems, and get deeper into the revision process, you can begin to experiment with diction. But as you can see in the poems in this anthology, even established, successful poets tend toward a more moderated diction; most of the poems in this collection avoid either artificially high or unnaturally low diction. A poem doesn't become a poem because you throw in a lot of $5 vocabulary words; it's possible to craft a rich, evocative, complex poem that doesn't include a single word you'd need to study for your college-admissions tests.

Once you do become more comfortable modulating your diction, you can use it to control the tone and mood of your poem; you can experiment with voice; and you can use diction to shape the meaning of your poem.

One diction-related question young poets often have is about profanity. "Can I swear in my poems?" they ask, hesitantly and perhaps somewhat hopefully. Well, in a vacuum, the answer is yes, go right ahead. Some of the poems in this anthology use words that some might consider profanity. But we don't always write in a vacuum. If you're writing a poem for your high school English teacher and there's a school policy against profanity, maybe save the swearing for some other poem. It's also important to think about why you want to swear in a poem. A well-placed naughty word can call attention to itself in compelling ways. It can reveal voice, or be good for a laugh at the right moment; it can make a poem's tone more conversational, mimicking the speech of everyday people, because let's face it, some people swear. However, two big cautions: First, if you're swearing to shock your reader, that's a bad idea. Swearing just isn't that shocking. Second, don't let your use of profanity be a substitute for more evocative, richer language. Too often, even the most inappropriate of swear words acts as just another abstract adjective.

SEE ALSO: LANGUAGE, SYNTAX, PRECISION

Doorways

When you sit down to write a line of poetry, you take the first step toward creating a poem—that much is obvious. However, as you decide what to include in the poem, you start to make conscious decisions about where the poem might go from there. When you decide to include something in the poem, in that first line and in every line thereafter, you create a doorway. A flower is a decent doorway, but something more specific like African Violet or Snapdragon is better because specificity gives us sharper images to play with. As a writer, you spend a lot of time creating doorways on the page, and then more time opening up those doorways to see where they might take you.

For example, “Roses are red” offers the writer two doorways: *roses* and *red*. It’s not the best line and it’s not the worst either; however, the poem depends completely on how the writer decides to open those doorways to see where the poem is going to take us. How big are those roses and why they are so red? How red are they, exactly? Whose roses are they and where are they growing? What breed of roses are they: American Beauty? Dark Desire? Little Buckaroo? What else is colored red out there in the garden: a rusty trowel? A bulldog’s lapping tongue? The beginning of a sunburn on the speaker’s neck? Opening these two doorways offers us so many options to move ourselves forward into the poem where we will undoubtedly create more doorways.

Note that a doorway can also provide opportunities for lateral moves too, using the original image as a foundation before moving off into a different direction. What is rising or has arisen (a play on the word *rose*)? Is there something to read (a play on the word *red*) out there in the garden? Are there things that are red in the speaker’s past or future? Doorways aren’t restricted to simply making literal moves —by moving laterally, the doorway can also create opportunities for figurative

moves, allowing for more metaphor and the creation of more associative meanings.

By opening doorways and following them to see where they will lead, a writer can create networks of connected portals that help her create and discover the territory the poem wants to cover, systems of corridors that help a writer discover what material exists in a poem, and that help a reader make literal and figurative connections throughout the poem. When you have so many doorways opening into the same corridor, you might find that you are on your way to creating metaphoric unity.

Yet, perhaps the most helpful thing about creating doorways for yourself is that when you get to that point in the poem where you're out of material or don't know what to write next, you can look back at the poem to see what unopened doorways you have left for yourself. If you are creating doorways adventurously, you end up leaving yourself an exit plan when you hit a dead end.

SEE ALSO: BEGINNINGS, MOVEMENT, PRECISION

Endings

How a poem ends is the most important thing about that poem. (Yeah, we told you a little while ago that beginnings mattered most, but we were wrong. Endings matter more.) Readers are most likely to remember the end of the journey; the poem that lands its final punch is a poem that will stick with us.

Maggie Smith's "Good Bones" (209) was published in the online literary magazine *Waxwing* in 2016, right around the time of a tragic mass shooting in an Orlando nightclub, and the poem went viral as people tried to make sense of their grief. The whole poem, of course, is brilliant, but it's the poem's ending that people have quoted over and over: "This place could be beautiful, / right? You could make this place beautiful." These closing lines perfectly capture a pleading sense of both despair and hopefulness that we all feel in the face of loss.

If you think of a poem as a feat of gymnastics, which seems an apt enough metaphor what with all the leaping and turning, you realize how important it is to stick the landing. All the handstands and giant loops and flyaways you do while you're up there spinning around on the uneven bars of your poem don't mean nearly so much if you end up stumbling or flat on your face when you come down. So, yes, stick the landing.

But how? How do you stick the landing? That's always the question. The answer, as always, begins with reading. Look at the final lines of every poem in this anthology to see how these poets have chosen to end their works. Read 1000 other poems and see how *those* poets ended theirs. (You might think 1000 is a hyperbolic number, an exaggeration. It's not. If anything, it understates the number of poems you should read.)

The ending of a poem often provides one final turn. One final surprise. Sometimes an ending provides a kind of closure, a putting to rest of the subject at

hand. More often, though, the final lines of a poem open up the poem, redirecting the poem's gaze outward, as Karen Skolfield does with her final directive to the reader to "watch where the birds go" (196). Similarly, Catie Rosemurgy expands her tangible list of "Things That Didn't Work" (200) to, essentially, everything: "Any shape or line whatsoever."

The epistolary form of Solmaz Sharif's poem (250) suggests a kind of ending, offering the traditional closing of a letter, "Yours," but one final redaction, of the letter-writer's name, leaves the poem open and uncertain. The reason most poets eschew closure is likely that close can make it appear the poem has solved its problems, answered its questions—and any poem worth its salt is grappling with problems too big to solve, questions that have no clear-cut responses. As we've said earlier, poems are not riddles or mathematical equations; they're slipperier beasts.

Poets often use repetition as a closing strategy, returning to a line, phrase, or image from earlier in the poem, as Mary Jo Bang does when she closes by repeating the opening line at the end of the final line (190). We call it coming full circle. But as with all use of repetition, the simple fact of repeating is not enough; the words must carry new weight, land with a new kind of force when we revisit them. The journey the poem has carried us along has changed our thinking, and now Bang's phrase "the role of elegy is" feels less definite, less declarative, and more of question. In this way perhaps, the ending offers the opposite of closure; a poem that appears to have begun in certainty ends in ambiguity—and, thus, nearer to true wisdom.

SEE ALSO: AMBIGUITY, REPETITION, SURPRISE, VALUE

Exploration

Robert Frost famously said, “No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.” This quotation is a good reminder to be open-minded in the writing process, to think of drafting a poem as a process of discovery, more exploration than explanation. While poets usually begin the writing process with at least some idea of what they want to say or wha t they want to write about, often they won’t know what they’re writing about, or what point they’re making, until the end. The poem must be able to follow the language where it leads. The poet must be open to surprising themselves in order to create surprise in the reader. The poem must be allowed to explore.

Think of the writing process as a voyage into some uncertain sea. The important work will happen once you get past the part of your journey that has already been mapped and into territory where you are uncertain of what’s next. This is when your poem leads to true discovery. It can be unsettling—or even downright scary—to venture into a poem without knowing where it’s going, without knowing what the poem is about, but sometimes, that’s the fun of making poems. Sometimes, only by giving up plans for the poem can the poet discover what the poem itself wants to be about.

In his important book *The Triggering Town*, Richard Hugo offers an example of a poet who wants to write a poem called “Autumn Rain” but of course quickly runs out of meaningful things to say about that subject. We’ve all written these poems: “September Frost,” “Summer Breeze,” “Spring Flowers” and so forth. In order for the poem to avoid devolving into a bundle of clichés and sentimental observations, it must move beyond its initial subject matter. If your mind is made up in advance of writing, the poem is likely to fall flat; if you have a particular closing line in mind from the beginning of the process, the reader is likely to feel the strain of the

poem being forced toward that line.

Much of this has to do with a poem's movement, and where it finds its leaps and turns. Often the best of those sudden jolts come at moments of peak exploration: when the poet abandons, at least temporarily, the primary subject and enlarges the poem by bringing in something new. Sometimes a poet achieves this through sound, sometimes through sensual association, sometimes through a seemingly random jolt from one topic to the next. Eileen Myles offers an example of this last one when her speaker, while looking at mountains below from an airplane, observes "how absurd to think / of Diet Coke / killing me" (167). Suddenly the poem becomes larger than an observation of the majestic peaks; it becomes a musing on mortality and on the mundanities that fill our time and mind. By leaving the initial subject—the mountains—it expands the poem's scope. Karen Skolfield makes a similar move when her speaker abruptly departs from the landscape of a desert island: "It's the wrong time to think / of all the houseplants I've neglected" (196).

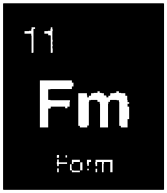
Both of these poems call attention to the seemingly odd movements of their speakers' minds, but this is how the human mind works: one subject reminds, for whatever reason, of another, and then two become connected, part of a single thought. Skolfield and Myles make this explicit in their poems, but other poets make the same kinds of moves as well. Richard Blanco's inaugural poem (222–4) moves across the landscape of the nation, from highway to classroom to playground to bridge, from city to plain. In "Teacher of the Year" (214–5), David Kirby springs from the story of the philandering professor to the speaker's own memories of a long-ago-witnessed altercation between a man and woman and then to Jack the therapy dog. Each of these stories would seem to have little to do with the others, but their presence in a single poem asks the reader to find the connective threads: curiosity, storytelling, desire, sex, intimacy, betrayal. By being willing to explore, Kirby effortlessly expands the significance of each story in the poem.

It is common for young poets to mistrust the wandering of their own minds, to think they need to reel in their consciousness to keep the poem on track, to mistake the desire for concision as a demand for a single-minded focus. But, as Hugo says, "It is impossible to write meaningless sequences." Once a poet has put two images —or two ideas, two anecdotes, two words—next to each other, the reader trusts that they belong there and begins to find connections between them, no matter how seemingly unrelated they might be according to the rules of ordinary logic. Poems operate with their own logic, and all poems make this claim to the reader: everything is here because it belongs here.

One of the reasons we read poems is to connect with the poet. When a poem truly engages us, we experience the pleasure of watching another human mind at

work in the world. We see the world through someone else's eyes, and the poet's language becomes our own. In this way, exploration allows that surprise the poet felt in the writing process—that joy of discovery—to be felt by the reader as well.

SEE ALSO: DOORWAYS, MOVEMENT, SURPRISE



Form

Form refers to a poem's structure and organization. It's just one part of the rhetorical construction of the poem, overall. It's difficult to pin down form in poetry because so many poems do all kinds of different things. Some poems rhyme and some poems don't. Some poems have long lines, some have short lines, and some poems look more like paragraphs than lineated poems. Some poems look as though they have been split in half, some in thirds, and some are scattershot across the page. Some poets reserve the notion of form for formal verse (see below) or poems with an easily identifiable pattern, but all poems have some kind of form—without form, a poem would be a random arrangement of words on the page, and although some poems appear to be random, that seeming randomness is almost always orchestrated.

A bit about fixed forms

Fixed forms offer the writer a specific pattern of rhythm, rhyme scheme, and stanzas. You have no doubt encountered fixed forms in earlier poetry or literature classes and textbooks; forms such as sonnets, haiku, limericks, and villanelles are common. Others like sestinas, ghazals, and pantoums might be less common, but are easily recognizable because of their unique structural patterns of repetition. Fixed forms can appear to be easy to write because it isn't difficult to follow the formal considerations; however, writing poems in fixed forms isn't so easy as merely following a template—it requires a nuanced understanding of the elements of poetry. The teaching of poetry writing has traditionally privileged form as the way into writing poems; in this book, clearly, we have taken a different approach. Form matters, yes, and formal poetry when done well gains great strength from the

interplay between the constraint of the formal pattern and the far-reaching exploration of the language. Here, though, we situate form as one rhetorical choice among many a poet makes in each poem they write.

Appendix B lists some books for further reading. If you are interested in fixed forms, you can look there for additional information, or you can look to the internet for explanations of the following fixed forms:

Abecedarian	Haibun	Pantoum
Acrostic	Haiku	Rondeau
Bop	Limerick	Sestina
Cinquain	Madrigal	Sonnet
Ghazal	Palindrome	Villanelle

Formal terminologies

What follows is a list of terms poets use to describe a poem's form. These terms will help you have more efficient conversations about the mechanics of a poem's form and the work that a poem's form does.

Caesura: An interruption or break in the middle of a line that breaks it in two. Often, poets create caesura with punctuation to signal a pause in the rhythm of the line. Other poets sometimes force caesura with white space on the page, as Janine Joseph does in "Move-In" (225). (See also: Music)

Contrapuntal: A poem that is made up of two independent poems placed side by side like Tarfia Faizullah's "Aubade Ending with the Death of a Mosquito" (175).

Couplet: A two-line stanza, often rhymed.

Dropped Line: A line break with the subsequent line indented so that it appears in the horizontal position it would have been in had the line not been broken. The effect is that it looks like the line

drops down after the break

like this.

Epigraph: A phrase or quote from another source that works as an introductory element at the start of a poem.

Formal Verse: Poetry that follows a pattern of rhythm and rhyme.

Free Verse: Poetry that does not follow a fixed pattern of rhythm or rhyme.

Line: A unit consisting of a string of words on a single line. The smallest structural unit in a poem.

Prose: Text that is composed without line breaks and operates in sentences rather than lines.

Prose poem: A poem that is written in prose rather than traditional lines.

Prosody: The system of a poem's rhythmic and sonic structures and the study of

poetic systems.

Quatrain: A four-line stanza.

Quintet: A five-line stanza.

Rhyme Scheme: The rhyming pattern of a poem. A's rhyme with A's and B's with B's.

- If the rhyme scheme is ABAB, then there are four lines with lines one and three rhyming together and two and four rhyming together.
- If it's ABAB CDCD, that means the first four lines have an ABAB rhyme scheme like above, and the second four lines have a similar rhyme scheme but with different rhyme sounds.
- ABAB CDCD EFEF just extends the above pattern. And so on.

Sextet: A six-line stanza.

Stanza: A unit consisting of a series of lines in a poem.

Section: A unit consisting of a series of stanzas in a poem. Sections are usually marked with a number or a letter or a subtitle of some kind.

Tercet: A three-line stanza.

Verse: A metrical structure.

SEE ALSO: LOGOS, MUSIC, RHYTHM

Gaze

Gaze is a way of describing the relationship between the poem and its subject. Poets are always observing things in the world, and as they look at a subject of interest, that subject is transformed during the process of making a poem. Think of gaze as the direction or angle in which the poem moves the reader's attention. The poet can gaze up at the subject and elevate it, putting it on that proverbial pedestal for admiration and worship. The poet can gaze down, treating the subject with scorn or derision. The poet can also gaze inward at the self or outward and away from the poem's subject. Gaze defines the writer's relationship to the subject, and in doing so, it establishes the relationship between the subject and the reader.

The most useful way of thinking about a poem's gaze isn't whether it has a gaze, or in which direction the gaze is pointed. Instead, we should consider what the effects of the gaze are and if those effects problematize the writer's ethos by eschewing empathy for something else like self-aggrandizement, self-amusement, or trying to be funny.

There is always some kind of distance between the writer and the subject, and sometimes that distance can distort perceptions of the subject. In his book *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, for example, Thomas Hine explains how adults, unable to understand teen behaviors and appearances, categorize and classify kids according to how they appear from an outsider's point of view. Hine calls this "the adult gaze." Kids have been called goths, Millennials, and Gen X-ers not because they all got together and made the decision to call themselves those things, but because some adult somewhere made up the label to define who those kids are. These labels and the (mostly negative) qualities associated with them effectively reduce those kids to the classifications created by the adult gaze. Gaze often becomes about power differentials, as it observes and transforms the subject

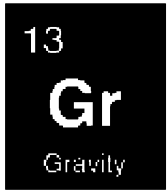
in ways that reinforce oppressive ideologies. The adult gaze labels the teens and forces them into a classification because adults are the dominant group over the teens, economically and socially.

One of the most common examples of gaze in poetry is the male gaze, a concept introduced by film critic Laura Mulvey in the 1970s. In film, the male gaze occurs when the camera focuses on a woman in ways that objectify her the way a heterosexual male might gaze at a female. The shot might trace the curve of her hips, linger over her cleavage or close in on her wet lips—robbed of her status as a human being, the woman is reduced to an object that seems to exist for the camera's viewing pleasure, the male's gaze.

Because poetry is driven by images and the transformative power of metaphor, it can be easy for a poem to unwittingly adopt a problematic gaze—the poet means for the poem say "I'm lonely and I like that person," but through its clumsy language choices the poem actually ends up saying, "Let's all objectify the woman." Or the poet might mean to make a joke about cheap Chinese food and unwittingly blunder into a poem that plays on tired racist tropes, reducing a culture to stereotypes for a quick laugh. When writers fail to traverse the distance between the viewer and subject, it can be difficult for them to find empathy or any kind of commonality.

This is not to say that writers who make poems with problematic gazes are necessarily bad people. Sometimes it's a matter of being blind to the connotations a particular phrase or image has to groups outside of the writer's circle. Or the writer might be so mired in the images made popular by a dominant or oppressive way of thinking that they don't realize that they reduce and demean their subjects. It's inevitable that a poet will one day churn out an early draft of a poem in which the gaze reduces the subject rather than creates empathy. Knowing that there is such a thing as gaze is the first step to controlling it. As a poet you'll want to avoid what might be for some a natural tendency to gaze down on those unlike them, making instead a concentrated effort at creating empathy.

SEE ALSO: METAPHOR, POINT OF VIEW, SPEAKER, VALUE



Gravity and Lightness

This element has to do with the emotional weight a poem has for the reader. When the poet Robert Bly named the six powers of poetry, the aspects he thought crucial for a good poem, he called one of them "psychic weight." In his essay "What the Image Can Do," Bly refers to an "adult grief that makes the poem feel heavy." This requirement that the poem have a heaviness isn't necessarily a prescription that a poem has to be about heartbreak or sorrow or the world's pain. Each poem illustrates gravity in its own ways, to lesser or greater degrees.

Weirdly, a poem's gravity is perhaps most noticeable when it's absent. A piece of light verse might be humorous or cute as it makes rhymes and curtsies with its tongue planted firmly in its cheek. Most limericks are light verse, and so are nursery rhymes and many greeting cards. These poems are light verse because they are emotionally one dimensional—they exist to amuse the reader and not much else. They are light because they lack gravity—they are missing the weight that creates an emotional experience for the reader outside of that which is predictable.

This is not to suggest that a poem's gravity is all about its seriousness. As gravity in the real world keeps our feet planted on the earth, gravity in a poem helps the reader feel grounded; the heaviness allows readers to anchor themselves in the poem's content. In poems like "No More Cake Here" by Natalie Diaz (191–2) and "Found: Messiah" by Jericho Brown (194), the gravity is right there in front of our noses. Diaz's poem places us at that surreal birthday party and the gravity is borne out of all the ways that the brother's absence appears in the poem. Brown's poem is grounded in the violence of the events depicted, as well as the fact that the poem is a found artifact, a blog post that mocks people who have been killed in the process of committing a crime. There are cruelties in both of these poems, one inflicted upon the speaker by the loss of a loved one and one inflicted upon the

world through a callous response to the dead. If you dig into Brown's poem with a bit of reading about it on the internet, you discover that "Found: Messiah" contains a hidden heaviness. The man in the poem, Messiah Demery, was the poet's cousin; there is violence in the shooting, but then a completely different kind of violence when the speaker finds his cousin's death mocked on the blog. These poems make loss a universal feeling through the specific details—the grief is not a generic one, which in turn makes the emotion of the moment more palpable for a reader by delivering a specific emotional experience.

Sometimes a poem seems to have an obvious gravity, but when we look hard at it, we discover a moment in the poem where the gravity becomes distinct and more nuanced—a center of gravity, of sorts. Anders Carlson-Wee's "Dynamite" (216) is a short narrative poem fraught with a violent game played by two brothers. At first, the violence seems to be the poem's gravity, but then that final line drops—the boys do such grievous harm to one another in the game with dynamite, and then that last line tells us that everything is dynamite. The ambiguity of "everything" brings us and our propensity to hurt and be hurt into the game. Layli Long Soldier's "38" (245–9) is a difficult poem because of the subject matter, which appears to be all the gravity a poem needs to give it weight. But then the poem goes on. And it goes on and it becomes more uncomfortable as it goes on, until it becomes clear that this unending experience is part of the poem's real, more powerful weight. In this sense, we can identify the weight around which the poem moves, or the weight toward which the poem cannot help but move.

All of this is different than saying that a poem ought to be about an emotional experience, as writing about emotions can result in melodrama. The poem's gravity creates significance through pathos, so the writer has to be careful—if the rhetorical moves to deliver moments of gravity are too overt, the reader might see the rhetorical move more clearly than they feel the emotional response, in which case the poem is likely to fail to deliver because its gravity is a false gravity.

SEE ALSO: MOOD, VALUE, WORK

Image

The image is perhaps the building block of all successful writing. The oft-repeated advice to “show, don’t tell” generally is a suggestion to the author to include more imagery in their writing. What is an image? Of course, the first thing we think of is something visual: an image is a thing we can see. But the image in writing is more than that: it’s anything that can be perceived with the senses: So, sight, yes, but also touch, hearing, taste, and smell.

Consider this: writing is the only art form that doesn’t appeal directly to the five senses. The viewer experiences a painting or a sculpture through the sense of sight. A person listens to music experiences a song through the sense of hearing. When a person sits down to eat a meal, the cuisine is experienced through the sense of taste and smell. In fact, art or not, the five senses form a person’s experience of the physical world. In a poem, however, there is only text.

Images—sensory details—immerse the readers in the world of your poem and allow them to move from the sensual world to your textual one. By appealing to your readers’ senses, you create a palpable sensation in their minds as they read, which in turn brings your details and ideas to life for them. You want your images to be concrete and specific, as opposed to abstract. To create concrete images, use your sensory appeals; in the world, a concrete thing is something you can touch, feel, taste, smell, or see. A cement block. An egg yolk. The scratchy bark of an oak tree. A field of lavender. An abstraction, in contrast, is intangible, ethereal, more concept than object. Love, grief, loss, loneliness, happiness, beauty—these are abstractions.

There are also words and phrases that can be either abstract or concrete, depending on context. The word abyss, for instance, could be concrete if you’re standing on the edge of a canyon in Arizona and referring to a particular abyss

that's full of rocks and cacti and sand. But if you're using abyss as a metaphor to refer to some great absence, it's an abstraction, and therefore less likely to be a powerful image in your poem.

In general, you are better off populating your poem with concrete images than with abstractions. This doesn't mean poets never use abstractions. Abstractions can be springboards to great specificity and precision, anchors to personification, or even subverted through contradiction. However, a poem that relies too heavily on abstraction fails to immerse readers in its details and emotions and risks becoming a Greeting Card Poem.

We mentioned that in addition to being concrete, your images should be specific. A bird is a concrete thing, of course, but the word bird itself is far from specific. Are you referring to a chickadee, an eagle, an ostrich, Foghorn Leghorn? A flower might be concrete, but white rose, sunny dandelion, purple tulip are all more specific—and therefore might be more meaningful to your poem.

Along these lines, you want to watch out for overrelying on abstract adjectives in your descriptions. If a figure in your poem has "beautiful eyes," what does that mean? Better to show us that they're pale brown and surrounded by thick, dark lashes and let us judge their beauty for ourselves. Words such as beautiful, ugly, terrible, fantastic, and others along these lines are abstractions, and they are also judgment words. Such judgment says more about the speaker doing the judging than about the subject being described. Sometimes, as a poet, you might want this effect; it depends on whether you're observing or interpreting and on whether you want the focus to be on the speaker's voice or on the subject itself. Bear in mind also that any such judgment is inherently subjective, beauty being in the eye of the beholder and all that. What the poet thinks of as a "modest" house might be one reader's mansion and another reader's hovel, depending on the size of the homes in the neighborhoods where they grew up. You should never assume that your judgment is "normal" or somehow universal. The best way to avoid falling into such a trap is to build your poem on a foundation of specific, concrete images and save abstractions and judgments for key moments when they serve the poem's larger purpose.

SEE ALSO: DEFAMILIARIZATION, OBSERVATION AND INTERPRETATION, PRECISION

Inventory

In short, inventory is the things in a poem. Poems need things to fill them so that the reader can experience the textual reality created by each poem—it's the inventory that helps the reader discover and understand the nature of that textual reality. Sandra Beasley's "Halloween" (228) has sexy costumes, ribbons, the eyelet of a corset, shoelaces and fish stuck in a pair of netted tights. Ada Limón's "Downhearted" (211) keeps the inventory simple with the horses, all that blood, and those internal organs. Naomi Shihab Nye's "1935" uses the inventory of the photograph to take the reader back in time to her father's boyhood. Inventory gives these poems physicality and prevents them from drifting off into the metaphysical aether.

Or take a look at "alternate names for black boys" (199) by Danez Smith—the listy nature of the poem immediately signals that the poem's reality is going to be discontinuous and fractured. Then the list gives us things, but in the form of images that are open-ended or self-contradictory. Perhaps you can picture starlight, but it becomes more difficult to picture when it's "oil heavy." The line "what once passed for kindling" could be ash or flame, and the open-endedness of the image allows the poem to convey both at once. This poem refuses to give us a full glimpse of the reality it creates because that's the nature of this reality. We get that inventory that defamiliarizes our ideas of what names should be, and a reality that is equally unfamiliar.

Inventory is also important to the writer of a poem in process. In his book *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, the fiction writer talks about the importance of inventory in a short story:

> Our rule for now shall be include things. Not because we're trying to clutter our stories up so that the sheer catalogues of clothing, furniture, drinks, sporting

> equipment make their own kind of effluvial music, or because we want to select the most symbolic or meaningful element in a character's life, but because we're looking for a way of surviving the writing of the story. When in doubt, include things.

This translates to writing a poem too. If as part of the drafting process the poem is filling it with inventory, the effect is that all of those things become doorways, too. With each new thing included in the poem, the writer creates opportunities to play with value, defamiliarization, and simply figuring out where the poem can go next.

SEE ALSO: DOORWAYS, IMAGE, VALUE

Language

For poets, language is our medium and our raw material: our oil paint, our charcoal, the colored threads from which we weave the tapestry of our poems. It's also the foundation of all the other elements in this section; we're emphasizing how important it is that poets make intentional, rhetorical use of language. Choosing to write a poem in the first place is a rhetorical act; it announces to the reader that you've chosen to privilege mystery over explanation, idiosyncrasy over universality, originality over familiarity, and uncertainty about the nature of life over simple, easy answers. You've chosen to make language the center of your creation.

You'll see lots of poets in this anthology and elsewhere make questions about how we use language an explicit part of their poems. Clearly, any poem in the ars poetica mode is doing so, but you can also see this, for instance, in Ada Limón's "Downhearted" (211), in which the poem moves from a consideration of the language of grief—"What / is it they say, heart-sick or downhearted?"—to a personified heart enacting the behavior of a grieving person. Limón challenges our ideas about the familiar, abstract language of emotion by bringing the metaphor to life within her poem. Anders Carlson-W ee explores the power of naming in "Dynamite," as the two brothers in his poem engage in increasingly threatening behavior toward each other, and the danger they face is related to the labels they've placed on the objects around them: "I say a hammer isn't dynamite. / He reminds me that everything is dynamite" (216). Naming a thing dynamite turns it into dynamite in the world of the poem, and that is how language works in poetry.

We recommend that young poets begin with contemporary language because that's their natural diction. The poems we read in high school often lead us to believe that poetry is built on archaic diction and antiquated phrasings. But this is

not 1600 or 1840, and we are not William Shakespeare or Edgar Allan Poe; our poems should sound as though they were written in the twenty-first century. Excise the "thees" and "thous" and "nevermores" from your poetic vocabulary. The same goes for convoluted syntax. The twisted structure of a Shakespearean sonnet —"And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / as any she belied with false compare"—worked 400 years ago for a poet trying to fit his ideas into iambic pentameter and a particular rhyme scheme, but when we try it now, we end up sounding less like the famous bard and more like Yoda from the *Star Wars* series: "Anger, fear, aggression, the Dark Side of the Force are they."

One component of language is frame of reference. As with your vocabulary and sentence structure, your frame of reference will be contemporary. Our language is shaped by the culture around us, and it's just as natural for our poems to be populated with mentions of commercial Halloween costumes and pinatas and online customer reviews as it was for Lord Byron to write about the concerns of nineteenth-century high-society London or for Allen Ginsberg to fill his poems with the cultural ephemera of 1960s America. We are not suggesting that you need to pepper your poems with Taylor Swift lyrics and Twitter memes to make them seem contemporary; indeed, you don't want your poems to become name-dropping, brand-filled billboards trumpeting their currentness. But nor should you ignore the culture around you. From high culture to pop culture, from classic literature to rap music, the world around us shapes our perceptions of the human condition—and importantly for poets, it shapes our language. That means it can be fertile territory for our writing.

A note about such cultural allusions: A common complaint you'll hear in workshops about any reference, whether it's to the myth of Sisyphus or *Hamilton*, the Iran-Contra scandal or World of Warcraft, is a reader saying, "It took me out of the poem." However, this is exactly the point of an allusion. It is deliberately intended to connect the poem to a particular event or figure or concept who also happens to exist outside the poem, whether in the world we all live in or in some other work of art. Some readers will recognize the allusion immediately and be able to engage with all the work it does in the poem. Others will have some familiarity with it, or be moved to go and look it up, and engage on a different level. Still others won't know the reference and won't look it up, which leaves them either to do the best they can to understand the reference based on context clues in the poem or to read around it.

In this way, such allusions are no different from any other language we use in a poem. Dorianne Laux can probably count on a shared understanding of the word "lighter" in her poem (198), but it's likely that at least some of her readers will be less familiar with the word "tenement." But if we could only use words that we were 100 percent certain our readers can define, it would severely limit our ability

to use language to its full capacity. Language is vast, ever-evolving, and complex; as poets, we must face the fact that we will never master it, never fully be able to bring it under our control to do our exact bidding. Yet that is our calling and our challenge, Sisyphean though it may be. And if you're not sure quite what that allusion means, feel free to look it up.

SEE ALSO: DICTION, MUSIC, SYNTAX

Lines

So this is what verse is all about, right? The line is the fundamental unit of the poem, perhaps the defining characteristic of poetry (setting aside the prose poem for the moment). It's how you know a poem when you see it: the words don't run all the way to the right margin of the page. This choice to stop short of the end of the page is similar to the choice to write a poem in the first place. Just as the act of writing a poem indicates that prose is inadequate to the task the poet has in mind, the choice to break a piece of writing into lines suggests that the poet needs more than word, sentence, paragraph; they need another unit of meaning, another syntactical strategy. The line offers the poet a whole new universe of possibilities.

Dividing a piece of writing into lines is part of what makes poems challenging for readers. The line is inherently disruptive—that's its raison d'etre: to interrupt the flow of language, to force a reset, a rest period, a starting over. The reader hesitates for just an instant at the end of each line before moving on to the next. It's up to us as poets to decide what happens in that micropause.

Backing up: Why lines at all? It has been said the length of a line is related to the human breath: when a poet recites poem, the line is determined by how much can be spoken before the natural pause for breath. This sounds lovely but perhaps seems a little too good to be true, because of course each of our capacities for breath are as varied as there are possibilities for the length of a poetic line.

The formal poetic line is a consequence of meter and rhythm. When Shakespeare wrote his sonnets in iambic pentameter, the line was determined by the presence of five metrical "feet," or a total of ten syllables in a pattern of unstressed-stressed, unstressed-stressed, etc. Unfortunately, this too often leads to the formal study of the poetic line as a counting exercise. Of course, there's more to prosody than this, and it's a rich and rewarding experience for a poet to study deeply the way metrical

verse works, how each syllable plays off those around it. But that's not our concern here. For those looking for more in-depth consideration of metrics and formal prosody, we recommend Robert Pinsky's *The Sounds of Poetry* and James Longenbach's *The Art of the Poetic Line.*

Here, we are concerned with the line in free verse: that is, poetry not defined by the metrical line. For the young poet, that very freedom can be scary. If you can break the line anywhere, if the choice is entirely yours, how do you decide? What if you do it wrong? How do you know what's best?

Lines that end at a natural stopping place (periods, question marks, sometimes commas) are called "end-stopped." Lines that end without punctuation, where the sentence proceeds uninterrupted to the next line, are called "enjambed." Neither is better than the other. Poems where every line is endstopped risk becoming chanty, predictable, staccato. Meanwhile, poems where every line is enjambed risk feeling uncontrolled, loosey-goosey, uneven.

As with every other decision one makes while writing, one never truly knows what's best or whether one is doing it wrong. So it's best just to decide there's no such thing as wrong and forge ahead. Honing one's instincts begins with reading and re-reading (again, this is true of most every aspect of writing). The more lines of poetry you read, the more you'll learn about how they work, what they do, how some line breaks catch us short and steal our breath while others send us effortlessly ahead into what's next without our even noticing their gentle hands at our back.

Here are two rules of thumb for breaking lines:

- Try to end lines on powerful words: most often nouns or verbs.
- Rarely if ever end a line on an article (a, an, the), preposition (for, to, of, etc.), or conjunction (and, but, or).

You'll have exceptions to these guidelines throughout this anthology and across all poems you read, but start with this in mind. The more poems you write, the more comfortable you'll be with breaking your lines.

Really, the line is another rhetorical tool. That means, as with every other element in this book, the prime consideration is the experience you are trying to evoke for your reader. Then as you begin to figure that out, you can figure out how best to use the line to help you achieve your particular aim. There are three main outcomes to take into account when breaking lines: pacing, unity (or deliberate lack thereof), and meaning.

Pacing: Poets control the pacing of a poem through line length. If each line break creates a micropause, the more line breaks you have in a poem, the slower the reading experience. Skinny poems with short lines tend to be choppier, more

hesitant. Longer lines flow more easily, creating a reading experience more like that of reading prose. Read Monica Youn's "Quinta del Sordo" (188) and then read Colette Arrand's "For Jake 'The Snake' Roberts, on the Occasion of Making an Unlikely Out in Centerfield During a Charity Softball Game" (241) and consider how differently paced they feel; think about how line length determines where you linger and where you speed ahead. Or look at how Kaveh Akbar uses end stops at the beginning of "Recovery" (207)—those first two lines go pretty quickly but when the enjambment starts on the third line, the poem slows down as it takes longer to get to the next period. Jenny Johnson changes pace within "The Bus Ride" (202) by establishing a pattern of fairly long lines at first and then abruptly intensifying with the shorter lines of the closing couplet.

Unity (or not): How a poem looks on the page is an important component of the reading experience. Poems with fairly regular line length have a uniformity that offers a certain kind of stability, and it's common for all forms of art to consider unity as a kind of goal. Sometimes, though, deliberate disunity is part of the project of a poem, and widely varied line lengths can be a way to achieve that. If you look at Natasha Trethewey's "History Lesson" (183), you'll see its regularity, its triplets of roughly regular line length (plus one final couplet). Compare that to Rebecca Hazelton's "Self Portrait as a Gorgeous Tumor" (242), which not only varies its line lengths, but also splashes the lines across the page, fighting against uniformity at every turn.

Meaning: Breaking lines allows a poet to create emphasis on certain words and phrases. Words that appear at the ends of lines receive emphasis, as the tiny pause that happens as the eye leaves one line and moves to the next places extra weight on those words. Words that appear atop each other at the ends of lines, especially in couplets and tercets, invite the reader to pay special attention to their juxtaposition. By using line breaks strategically, the poet guides the readers toward the elements of the poem that matter most. In "Ars Poetica," Traci Brimhall breaks one line thus:

> … a bird startled to find
> there wasn't more light on the other side
> of the window (170).

The combination of the stanza break and the line break call great attention to the phrase "on the other side," leaving little doubt that the poem is in part about life and death, and not merely the two sides of a window flown into by a bird.

Often this kind of meaning-making can be surprising. An example: a word that seems to mean one thing at the end of the line can mean something different when you get to the next line. (But if you do so too often, your reader will stop trusting you, so you want to save the technique for significant moments in your poem.)

Look at these lines from Karen Skolfield's "How to Locate Water on a Desert Island":

> .... Even science
> can't make up its mind about the divining
> rod trembling in the old man's hand: (196)

That word divining takes on tremendous importance here because of the line break. In the sentence, the word is an adjective, part of the phrase "divining rod," which is a tool used to find water when deciding where to dig a well. But in the line? The word means something entirely different: "science / can't make up its mind about the divining." The word becomes a noun, momentarily, and calls attention to the possibility that there are questions science cannot answer.

Similarly, consider these lines from Eileen Myles' "To the Mountains":

> when I look out
> at you
> how absurd to think
> of Diet Coke (167)

As a sentence, it reads: "When I look out at you, how absurd to think of Diet Coke." But when broken into lines, "how absurd to think" stands alone for a moment as you read, calling into question the very concept of human thought in the face of the mountains' majesty. Natalie Diaz offers a similar moment at the beginning of "No More Cake Here":

> When my brother died
> I worried there wasn't enough time
> to deliver the one hundred invitations (191–2)

In the sentence, the worry is about the relatively mundane task of delivering invitations; in the line, it suggests a far more existential fear. In each of these examples, it's not that one meaning is more "correct" than the other; it's not that the line takes precedence over the sentence or vice versa. Both meanings exist simultaneously; as the poem unfolds and reveals its meaning line by line, each line becomes its own unit of meaning separate from the meaning of the sentence. That is what poetry does: operates on multiple levels of meaning at once. The line is an essential tool for accomplishing this.

There are some poems in this anthology that challenge our notion of the line and by so doing expand the possibilities of the form. Dean Rade r's "Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry" (234–4) is mostly a prose poem, with the exception of the five-line fragment at the end. Both Patricia Lockwood (176–9) and Layli Long Soldier rely on the sentence to determine their lines, although like Rader, Long Soldier

breaks that pattern at the end. Gary L. McDowell (206) uses white space within his lines to create caesura. Karyna McGlynn (205) and Tarfia Faizullah (175) use variations of the contrapuntal form. Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib (229) offers a prose paragraph but uses slashes to replicate the pacing effect of the line, albeit with a different visual effect.

The line is an infinitely malleable element, bendable and breakable, and incredibly resilient. Young poets are encouraged to play and experiment with the line. Here's something you can do for practice: Find a published poem you love and retype it without any line breaks. Read it as a prose paragraph. What is lost by removing the line breaks? What, if anything, is gained? How is the reading experience changed? Then play with the line breaks. Give it short lines. Give it long, expansive lines. Try a mix: some short, some long. How does the poem change as you put it through these new incarnations? How can you manipulate line length and line breaks to call attention to different images, ideas, sections of the poem? One thing you should do is consider each line individually. Each line is its own unit of meaning, even if that meaning isn't grammatical but evocative.

SEE ALSO: LANGUAGE, RHYTHM

Lyric

As with narrative, you'll notice that lyric appears in this book as both an element and a mode. That's because there are poems that are driven almost entirely by the lyric impulse—poems in the lyric mode—but most if not all poems include lyric elements, even if they function primarily in some other mode. Hence, this section you're reading right now.

What do we mean when by the lyric impulse? Historically, a lyric poem has been defined as a short poem that describes the speaker's feelings or emotions. They are often written in the first person and are often image-rich or musical, arising from a tradition of short poems delivered to the accompaniment of music (often an actual lyre, back when those were more common). This explains the relationship of the term to the lyrics of a song, which of course is how the broader culture usually uses the word.

As a poetic element, lyric refers to how a poet handles time. As opposed to narrative time, which is largely chronological and action-driven, lyric time is determined by feelings and associations. Whereas one could make a timeline of a narrative, laying out events in the order they occur, lyric time might be more accurately described as a bubble in which past, present, and future exist simultaneously. The poem's movement within that bubble is not determined by the passage of time but by connections the speaker makes between events and emotions.

Tracy K. Smith's "Song" (212) opens by suggesting it's interested in chronology, as the poet remembers "your hands all those years ago / Learning to maneuver a pencil," but the poem moves away from that, examining those same hands in various states: "lying empty / At night," or "How they failed. What they won't forget year after year." The poem glides among past, present, and future, and

the connective tissue is not the passage of time or the narrative development of any particular story, but the emotional connection the speaker feels to those hands. This is the lyric impulse.

Smith's poem is itself a lyric poem, but even poems that appear to be more straightforwardly narrative include lyric elements. David Kirby's "Teacher of the Year" (214–5) ties together its three separate narrative threads through lyric association. Ocean Vuong's "Of Thee I Sing" (238–9) is a present-tense narrative of the assassination of President Kennedy as seen through the eyes of his wife, but there's a lyric moment at the heart of the poem, that contradiction when the speaker explodes time for a moment to say, "I'm not Jackie-O yet / & there isn't a hole in your head, a brief / rainbow through a mist / of rust. I love my country." This pausing of time is a lyric move, placing the narrative chronology on hold to explore different concerns.

As you read poems, look for these moments of lyricism, lines, and phrases where the poet moves beyond time and logic to make connections that defy narrative logic. This is arguably one of the defining characteristics of poetry. A work of prose is more commonly driven by narrative and chronology: the effects of time's passage on the characters depicted, how an action now shapes future events. (We're speaking in generalities here; there are novels and short stories that push against this definition.) But poetry concerns itself with precisely these kinds of lyric leaps: moments driven by language and feeling, not by the cause-and-effect logic of narrative.

SEE ALSO: EXPLORATION, NARRATIVE

Metaphor

You're probably familiar with the concept of metaphor: a comparison between two things in order to make a rhetorical point. You probably also know the related term simile, also a comparison that specifically uses the word "like" or "as" in the comparison. Effective use of metaphor is essential to how poetry operates. Metaphor and simile are a large part of how poets get their pieces to offer multiple layers of meaning at once. There are Tibetan Buddhist monks who practise an art called throat-singing or harmonic chanting in which the human voice appears to be capable of producing more than one pitch at a time. It's kind of a miracle, or the appearance of a miracle at any rate, and it's the same thing we do when we employ metaphor to make our poems reverberate on multiple frequencies simultaneously.

As we've argued earlier in this book, language itself is metaphor. The word highway is not the highway—it's a symbolic representation of the highway, a configuration of ink on paper or pixels on a screen that we've agreed will stand in for the highway. But here's something amazing: recent neuroscience studies using MRI technology have shown that reading or hearing the language for a thing activates the same part of the brain as observing that thing. In other words, when you read "flashlight," the same neurons light up the same area of your brain as when you hold a physical flashlight in your hands. Talk about a miracle! We suspect that every poet who learns of this study lets out a triumphant cry of, "I knew it!" Poets have long taken on faith that language works this way; now we have scientific support for our hunch.

Think about what this suggests about the power of language and of metaphor. It means that a metaphor is not the same thing as an analogy. An analogy is a comparison used to make a point in an argument or when explaining something; the initial subject remains primary, with the object of the comparison serving no

larger purpose other than to shed light on the original point. If someone is teaching you about photosynthesis and tells you that what the pla nt cells are doing when they store light is the same as when you buy more food than you need at a restaurant and save some in your fridge for later, that's an analogy. The meal at the restaurant isn't important to the lecture except insofar as it explains the scientific process your teacher wants you to learn.

But in a metaphor, the two sides carry equal or near-equal weight. When you write in a poem that your heart is on fire, in the world of the poem, now there's a fire in your poem, and your poem-heart actually is burning. Remember that the word "fire" triggers the same neurons for your reader that a literal fire would. That means you can't go willy-nilly lighting fires in your poems, thinking, "Oh, they're just metaphors." (This example is very similar to the exploration Ada Limón takes on in "Downhearted" (211), in which she takes a clichéd turn of phrase and brings it to life within the poem, renovating the cliché.) The two sides of a metaphor are called the tenor (the original subject) and the vehicle (the new subject). In the best metaphors, these two parts each matter. A good metaphor illuminates both sides of the equation. When Oliver de la Paz writes, "Mornings are a sustained hymn / without the precision of faith" (173), he teaches us something about both mornings and hymns; the metaphor works in both directions. The introduction of the hymn enlarges the poem; it is not merely an analogy to help us understand something about mornings. Now, because of this metaphor, we understand that this poem is also about faith, religion, spirituality, in addition to being about feeding birds to start a day.

A simile is not merely a metaphor with an extra word thrown in; that "like" or "as" changes the meaning of the sentence rather significantly. It's one thing to say, as Tarfia Faizullah does in "Aubade Ending with the Death of a Mosquito" (175), that a rising cloud of mosquitoes is *like* smoke; it would be another thing entirely to write that the mosquitoes *are* smoke. To say a thing is similar to another thing is different than saying that thing *is* the other thing. The distinction is not merely semantic but rhetorical. Each item in Danez Smith's "alternate names for black boys" (199) is a metaphor; the boys they are referring to *are* these things, carry these names—a far more powerful claim than merely suggesting similarity.

You'll often find poems that use what's called an extended metaphor, wherein the comparison lasts for more than a sentence or two. Limón's poem does this, extending the metaphor of the personified heart through the final two-thirds of the poem. In Anders Carlson-Wee's "Dynamite" (216) the idea that everything is dynamite is an extended metaphor. In Mark Halliday's "Trumpet Player, 1963" (236–7), the song "Surf City" becomes an extended metaphor for empty promises about happiness and decadence. Sandra Beasley uses costumes as an extended metaphor for gender identity in "Halloween" (228) and Richard Blanco uses the

physical features of the American landscape as a metaphor for its diverse citizenry in “One Today” (222–4) Because a metaphor becomes real once you inscribe onto your page, it allows you the freedom to continue exploring within it. This is much more fun than merely thinking of it as an analogy.

Remember that the role of metaphor is to expand or clarify a poem’s meaning, not to obscure it. It would be easy to write a poem, say, about preparing for a first date using entirely an extended metaphor of a soldier preparing for battle. However, this in the end would, in all likelihood, be a shallow poem. Because the metaphor is being used to cover up the poem’s true subject rather than to find some new layer of meaning in it, and because the battle language is being used more as analogy than as true metaphor, it’s probable that the resulting poem says nothing new about either the task of the soldier or the original situation of getting ready for a date. (Often the young poet who writes this poem reveals the true situation in the final line or two, opting for a cheap but ineffective surprise.)

Closely related to the extended metaphor is the idea of metaphoric unity. Because each metaphor you introduce into your poem expands the world of the poem, it’s generally a good idea to rely on metaphors that seem to belong in the same world. If within five lines, a poet claims that love is an unlocked door in a tall castle, a sinking ship, a tulip on a spring morning, a minefield, and a Kanye West song, the reader is going to be a little dizzy. The world these metaphors create is haphazard and chaotic, and the reader’s mind is being pulled in a lot of directions. There’s a distinct lack of metaphoric unity here. Now, this is something you can do on purpose, if that sort of disorientation is what you’re after, but do so with caution.

Metaphor and the reader

The metaphor is a rhetorical device, and as such, the poet must consider how the metaphor works and how it contributes to the reader’s experience of the poem. Faizullah’s mosquitoes are like smoke (175) and de la Paz’s morning is a hymn. A swarm of mosquitoes looks like smoke if there are thousands of them flying in a dense cloud, and even then perhaps only from a distance. And the morning is nothing like a hymn, really—but it’s this difference between the tenor and vehicle that makes for a good metaphor.

Metaphors are interactive—they require the reader to do a bit of work in bringing the tenor and vehicle together to create meaning. Part of what makes metaphors work is the reader’s recognition of the difference between the tenor and the vehicle. If the two are too close together, then the meaning being made is too simple to be interesting. Love is a strong emotion or grief is a feeling of sadness lack the distance a reader needs for surprise. Similarly, if the relationship between

the tenor and the vehicle is a familiar one, then the metaphor risks being cliché. Love is a heart or a kiss. Grief is a cemetery at night. These are predictable and obvious, and readers tend to read past them because the cliché doesn't say anything the reader doesn't already know.

It's when a metaphor offers the reader a moment of disorientation as they try to reconcile the difference between the tenor and vehicle that the metaphor gets its work done. Natasha Trethewey shows the reader minnows that become switchblades (183) and Kim Addonizio transforms a human tongue into an oxygen tube (204). It's moments like these when the metaphor asks the reader to do a bit of work to bring the tenor and vehicle together to create some kind of transformation in the poem. It's not a lot of work, but enough so that there might be a moment where things don't connect before everything makes sense.

SEE ALSO: DEFAMILIARIZATION, IMAGE, SURPRISE

Mood

One of the kinds of work a poem does is to create a particular mood or tone. A poem can be wistful or mournful, nostalgic or defiant, gloomy or joyous, sarcastic or reverent, tender or blunt, or some combination of these things, or most any other emotional state. As you read the poems in this anthology, ask yourself what mood the poem evokes in you—and then try to figure out what specifically on the page ma kes you feel that way. That will give you a strong sense of how to establish mood in your own poems.

Mood exists in a poem at the intersection of diction, speaker, voice, all of these elements combining to set the tone for the piece. The words you choose, from whose mouth those words emerge, and the attitude behind them—it all blends together.

Mood is also closely related to setting: the geographical and chronological location of a poem. David Tomas Martinez's "In Chicano Park" (235) is set in a particular time and place, and the images are hard (metals and concrete), industrial, crumbling. The urban landscape helps set the tone for the poem; in turn, the mood teaches us something about the place being explored. It's a reciprocal (and rhetorical) relationship. This is true in Laura Kasischke's "Landscape with one of the earthworm's ten hearts" (234) as well, with that lone apple tree and the winter soup establishing a particular season and setting: the mood is chilly, forlorn.

Consider the effect on the reader's mood of the snow in Traci Brimhall's "Ars Poetica" (190) or the superheated Sonoran desert in Eduardo C. Corral's "To Juan Doe #234" (168). The temperature serves as a sense detail, connecting us physically to the scenes depicted in the poem and helping shape our reaction to them. Just as the weather in the real world can impact our emotional well-being, the literal and metaphorical weather of a poem shape our mood as we read.

SEE ALSO: GRAVITY, IMAGE, INVENTORY, PRECISION

Movement

We mention throughout this book that sometimes the point of a poem is the journey it takes a reader on from beginning to end. This is a metaphor that implies physical movement. One comment you'll often hear in a workshop setting is that a poem "flows well," but when you ask the commenter to expand on that notion, to explain what makes the poem's flow so effective, they're often stumped. Yes, a poem can flow; yes, a poet has movement. For the reader, that movement is indeed physical, the eye flickering from left to right and back again and down the page with the poem, sometimes back up to revisit a previous word or line. What does the poem do on the page to foster such movement? Each word and phrase, each line and sentence, plays a role in taking the reader toward the end of the poem. Let's look at how a poem can move, leap, and turn.

Move: Each poem progresses logically through its subject or story, but each poem also creates its own logic. Poems move at varying rates and in a variety of directions. They move forward, backward, up and down, through narrative time or through physical space. Christina Olson's "In Which Christina Imagines That Different Types of Alcohol Are Men and She Is Seeing Them All" (218) proceeds chronologically through a series of first dates; David Tomas Martinez's "In Chicano Park" (235) takes the reader on a tour of a specific location. This movement can follow chronology or reverse chronology. The poem can move fast or slowly, depending on line length, rhythm, and the rate at which it delivers its images. This simple movement is apparent in Tony Hoagland's poem "Jet" (213). The first stanza anchors us on the porch with the boys and it moves our gaze up toward the stars. In the third stanza, we are moving back down to earth, and we go so fast that we seem to be simultaneously in the sky and on the ground, in the big sky river and in the beer bottles in the grass.

Leap: A poem doesn't always proceed logically—sometimes the language jolts sideways and appears to create a kind of disjunction in time or space. Sometimes the poem surprises us with an abrupt change of subject or scenery. The poem can make a lateral move from one train of thought to one that is perhaps parallel or similar. There are big leaps and small leaps, but the leap always surprises us with some kind of change. In "Jet," we are anchored in the first stanza on the porch with the boys, but then we leap to outer space in the second stanza. Once we are there, we get those space images: asteroids, astronauts and the weird fish.

Turn: When a poem lands a leap, it often looks around to find a new perspective on things. It finds its way to a new place and then turns to discover something that it did not know before. Sometimes, the poem uses the turn to leave the speaker with a new perspective; sometimes the turn reveals something new to the reader about that which has come before. In "Jet," this happens in those final two lines. Throughout the poem, we've experienced sensory images that move up and down and leap all over the page—we are drunk with images throughout most of the poem. In that final turn, we are confronted with the speaker's attitude toward the drunkenness. There a desperate wistfulness for drinking on the porch with the boys, an almost painful desire to be back there. When we reach those last lines, we find that they give the rest of the poem a slightly different meaning than it had up until that point.

Similarly, "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins (169) starts with five short stanzas, each of which ends in a leap to a new place, each place moving with new systems of imagery and metaphors at work. There are five leaps before the leap to the torture stanza—it begins with "but," which negates everything that came before it. All the delightful color slides and mice and waterskiing are erased with that conjunction, leaving us in that room with the chair and a length of rope—that's the biggest leap in the poem. Then the turn happens at the end when we discover what the torture is all about: extracting meaning from the poem. The leap to the torture room ruins the playful tone of the poem, and then the turn reveals that it's the quest for meaning that's to blame.

Some poems move more than leap, and some leap all over the place. Some poems end in a turn and others have multiple turns. What is constant is movement. Physically and metaphorically, the reader is indeed taken on a journey.

SEE ALSO: BEGINNINGS, ENDINGS, EXPLORATION, LINES

Music

Poetry is descended in part from an oral—and aural—tradition. Poems were intended to be both spoken and heard long before they were written down. Even now, for many poems, how they sound when read aloud is an important part of the experience of the piece. You should read your poems aloud to yourself during the writing and revision process; sound can be a useful guiding principle in a poem, a source of tension and association and surprise.

But poems are not songs, and songs are not poems. Song lyrics can be poetic and very often share features with poems. But even though Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the distinction between songs and poems matters. This is not to suggest that song lyrics are inferior to poems in any way, merely that they are a different genre, a different form of art. Lyrics are intended to be sung, and rely on that fact, as well as instrumental accompaniment, as crucial parts of the experience. A song whose lyrics are sentimental and dripping with cliché can still be a terrific listening experience because of the human voice singing it, or the piano accompanying the melody, or the killer guitar solo in the middle.

A poem does not have a vocalist or a lead guitarist or a pianist. All a poem has is its language, words on a page. We're focused on written poetry here; slam or spoken-word poetry, like songs, is a different thing, intended to be delivered live to an audience of listeners rather than readers, including a performative aspect. The distinction between stage poetry and page poetry also matters, though here again, we're suggesting no hierarchy between the two. Just a difference.

So how do you make music without sound? That's the challenge.

Music is of course closely related to rhythm, but rhythm isn't the only way to create music in your poems. Repetition, too, is a highly musical element, which has its own section this book. Here are some other rhetorical devices poets use to shape

their language into music:

Alliteration: The repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words. Look at the "S" sounds in these lines from Saeed Jones:

> Something pink in his fist,
> negligee, lace, fishnet, whore.
> His son's a whore this last night
> of Sodom. And the record skips
> and skips and skips (180).

Closely related is consonance, which again is the repetition of consonant sounds, though not necessarily at the beginning of words.

Assonance: The repetition of vowel sounds in nearby words, as in the "I" sounds in fist and fishnet in the above example from Jones' poem.

Caesura: A pause in a line of poetry, often near the middle. Sometimes they occur as the result of natural grammatical breaks (the end of a sentence, a comma between clauses) like these comma-made caesura from Traci Brimhall's "Ars Poetica":

> People bend over, afraid to touch her
> in case she might rise, a bird startled to find (170)

(See also: Form)

Refrain: A line repeated at recurring intervals in a poem. Typically, refers to a whole line (as in "My child is old as the stone" in Terrance Hayes' "Ode to Stone"), but even a single word can become a kind of refrain, as "Nothing" does in Bob Hicok's "Elegy with lies" (189).

Rhyme: The repetition of end sounds in words. In formal poetry, this often means end rhyme, where the last lines of adjacent or nearby lines end with the same sound. Major Jackson's "Aubade" (174) uses an ABAB rhyme scheme in his quatrains. But poems can also turn to internal rhyme for music, which means using rhyming words but not at the ends of lines. Matthew Gavin Frank does so in these lines with heartbreak, rake, and lake: "Our heartbreak is last year's // nest, the frozen lake, the yard / we forgot to rake."

Slant rhyme: Also called "near rhyme," this refers to the use of words that do not share an exact end sound but come close. Karen Skolfield uses this in "How to Locate Water on a Desert Island" (196), ending lines with small and still, love and us. Closely related is the notion of eye rhyme or sight rhyme, which refers to words that don't sound the same but look alike on the page: love and move, cough and bough. This is less about sonic music and more about visual music: the suggestion of music. All varieties of rhyme—exact, slant, and sight—do more than create a sonic or visual connection between words; they also connect those words in terms of meaning. The words are yoked by the rhyme, and that yoking invites readers to make connections between the meanings and associations of the words.

These rhetorical devices work in harmony (get it?) to make music one of the driving forces of a poem's movement. Often a sonic connection between words provides the poet with an opportunity for a leap, music offering a kind of logic for

a poem that is neither narrative nor intellectual, but physical.

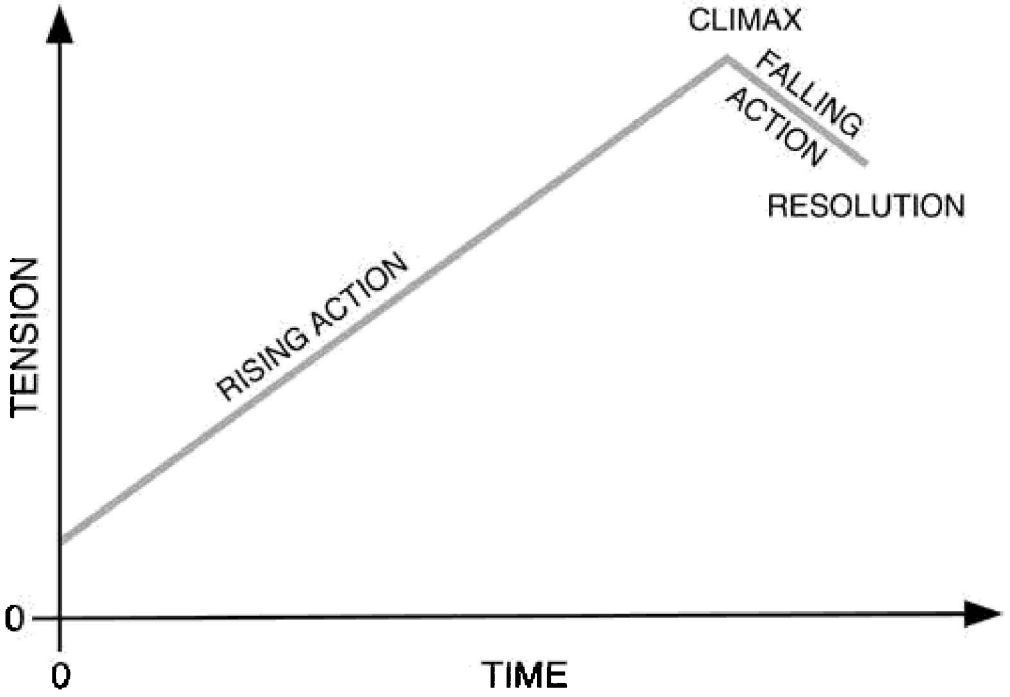
SEE ALSO: RHYTHM, SYNTAX

Narrative

Storytelling is an inherently human trait. Ever since the human species sat around campfires in ancient caves, we have shared stories: remembering experiences, showing off the power of the imagination, finding common ground with one another. People love stories and are drawn to them.

Poems, of course, are one way to tell a story. You'll notice that narrative appears not only here in the Elements section of this book, but also in the anthology section as a mode. There, we'll be looking at how narrative acts as a larger driving force for some poems—those that are driven *primarily* by narrative, by that storytelling impulse. But here, we want to look at narrative as an internal element of poems—another useful tool in the poet's workshed.

The essentials of narrative are captured in the inverted check mark that should be quite familiar to fiction writers. A narrative begins with a problem, some sort of catalyst to set things in motion, followed by a sequence of events we call rising action—that is, tension rises as things move forward in time. The stakes grow higher and higher until the climax or crossroads, where tension is at its highest. Anything after that is falling action leading to the narrative's resolution.



It's important for a poet to realize that even in poems that are decidedly non-narrative—poems that move almost entirely through sound or abstract association or some other lyrical device—the reader will impose a narrative. It's what we do; it's one of the ways we make sense of what we're reading. Laura Kasischke's "Landscape with one of the earthworm's ten hearts" (234) is in some ways an anti-narrative: nothing much *happens* in the poem. Yet it *feels* like a narrative. The poem introduces characters and setting, and there's high dramatic tension in its stillness, so that at the end of the poem, that thumping sound feels like a climax of a series of events. Kasischke uses the components of narrative—and our predilection for imposing narrative on anything we read—to her advantage.

If you're stuck in the process of writing a poem, narrative offers one avenue for escape: create a problem, up the stakes until you're at a turning point, then resolve the problem. Note that "resolve" doesn't necessarily mean "solve" here; the most complex and interesting problems—those most worth writing about—are often unsolvable, and poems that wrap up things too neatly ("... and they lived happily ever after") risk being cheesy, sentimental, overly simplistic.

As an element, narrative has as much to do with how a poet handles time as it does in providing an external structure. Narrative time—as opposed to lyric time—is concerned with chronology and how events unfold through the passage of time. So those moments in your poem where you explore the relationship of past to present are narrative moments; narrative posits chronology as a meaningful

explanation for how the world works. We understand the present better by examining the past.

David Tomas Martinez's "In Chicano Park" (235) is not a narrative poem, exactly, as the poem itself exists more in lyric time (that bubble of past, present, and future), but it most definitely includes narrative elements, exploring the passage of time as cause and effect in this landscape. We sense the passage of time and the existence of story in these lines: "men walking the streets to work / look longingly towards their doors."

In a similar fashion, Jeannine Hall Gailey's "Wonder Woman Dreams of the Amazon" (240) slips effortlessly between meditative and narrative modes: "I capture Nazis / and Martians with boomerang grace," clearly a narrative moment, is followed by the dreaminess of "When I turn and turn, the music plays louder." The capturing of Wonder Woman's enemies occurs in narrative time while the turning and the music happens outside of time. Narrative is not the mode of the poem, but it is an element within it.

SEE ALSO: LYRIC

Observation and Interpretation

When we sit down to write, we make a (sometimes subconscious) choice between two ways of delivering the subject to the reader: observation and interpretation. Each approach suggests a different relationship between text and subject.

Observation: When a writer is conveying to the reader what is literally happening, they are writing an observation. This can involve hard data from the five senses and isn't accompanied by explanations or filtered through any kind of interpretive lens. In portraying the world in objective terms, the writer is able to deliver to the reader a simple who, what, when, where, and how of a situation. The reader gets the straight-up facts with no fancy bells or whistles to enhance the experience beyond relaying the literal events or objects being described. *Clarice set fire to the living room. She dropped a lit match into a garbage can, stepped back and laughed. The garbage can was full of all our contracts with the corporation*. These are three observations made about Clarice and the things that she has done.

Interpretation: Writers are always making observations about their surroundings and once those observations are on record, they transform them through interpretation. Interpretation filters the word through some kind of consciousness, that of a writer, speaker, or character. Interpretation is figurative material, often involving metaphors or similes, that works to explain or contextualize observational information. *Clarice was beautiful like the ravenous night. She struck a match and cackled like a night bird as the flames threatened to engulf the whole room. The garbage can held our papers, our tethers to the evil corporation.* There is much interpretation at work here: beauty is subjective, the night is not actually ravenous, a match strike is a figure of speech, the night bird is a simile, and so on.

These things seem pretty straightforward, but sometimes telling them apart can be tricky. For example, *the fire was big*—well, compared to what? Size can be a subjective measure, but this might not be a helpful distinction to nitpick. Or *I feel angry, like I have a crocodile's heart.* Is that an objective declaration of feeling, or a comparison of anger to the impossibility of having a reptile's heart? In this case, it's an interpretation of the objective declaration, and knowing that helps the reader to understand that the crocodile is angry and not hungry or sad.

Poems, of course, rely heavily on interpretation, but there can also be a lot of power in the observed moment. "Aubade" by Major Jackson (174) is largely observation, which allows the otherwise quiet interpretation to be delivered with more weight. The scarf of cirrus, the antlike minutes, the blissful seasons—these interpretive phrases are not moments of outlandish or ceremonial spectacle, but they are given more emphasis by the everyday things you would rather be doing that surround them. Similarly, "History Lesson" by Natasha Trethewey (183) depends on the careful observation of the details in that photograph so that the tiny interpretations can work—the flowered hips, the sun cutting the Gulf, and the minnows like switchblades. These interpretive moments are important in that they say a lot about the mood of the poem's speaker as they defamiliarize and provide additional value not just to the girl in the photo, but also to the woman who snapped it.

Conversely, a poem like "Quinta Del Sordo" (188) by Monica Youn appears to be almost completely interpretation of the painting by Goya. We don't get any straight observation of the painting itself because describing the painting literally isn't the point—that's more the realm of catalog descriptions than that of poetry. However, by creating an interpretation of the painting, Youn transforms Goya's visual art into her own textual painting.

A poet doesn't necessarily have to privilege one of these methods over the other. That is, a poet who only works in observations risks becoming dry and uninspiring, while a poet who only works in interpretations risks overwhelming the reader with figurative language or perhaps leaving the reader confused. Interpretation and observation work together to contextualize, clarify, and transform the writer's subjects into poetry.

SEE ALSO: DEFAMILIARIZATION, IMAGE, VALUE

Point of View

Often, writers look at point of view as a fiction technique, but the point of view matters in a poem, too. It is crucial to determining the reader's relationship to the poem as it's being read. It's more than the pronouns being used, more than the perspective from which the writer decides to write the poem. Point of view offers the reader an anchor in the poem. There are three points of view, as you probably already know: first, second, and third person, each offering the reader a different seat, a different vantage point from which to experience the poem. Point of view seems pretty straightforward, but there are complexities to consider when using any of them in a poem. Understanding precisely what point of view is and how it's used in poems is key to getting the most work out of it.

Third person

The third person point of view is the realm of they/he/she/it. What matters most here is where the reader's seat is in the poem, and in the third person, it's always outside the poem. The reader might be up close, so close that the sensory detail is overwhelming. Or the reader can be far away, across the street, on the other side of town or on the surface of the moon. Being outside the poem, there is greater opportunity for objective observation and quantitative information. Sometimes a poem's point of existing is to bear witness, to look at something and acknowledge its existence. This isn't to say that the third person is necessarily an objective point of view because the third person can be highly subjective. But sometimes, with distance comes clarity, and third person is a good way of creating distance in a poem.

First person

When I write in the first person point of view, the reader's seat is inside the poem along with me. It's an intimate place to sit—so close to the speaker and all those thoughts and emotions and interior noise. There are two kinds of first person points of view in poems.

Singular: The first person is the realm of the "I." When I write in the first person, the poem uses my perception as the filter through which it relates to the world and because of this, everything has some amount of subjectivity to it. My observations are made through my intellectual/cerebral/emotional lenses. The stories I tell are my stories, which can sometimes include stories about other people from my perspective. Note that there might be a difference between me (the poem's writer) and the speaker—but in terms of point of view, it's more important to notice how close the seat the poem makes for the reader is to the I, how the reader takes a seat and is surrounded by all those interior thoughts and feelings. Just as I might use third person to find some objectivity, I might choose first person to discover the beauty of subjectivity.

Plural: We can also choose to write in the first person plural, the "we" voice. However, when we are using a we point of view, we should know who we are. If we are using a universal we, then the point of view includes everyone everywhere. Or if the we is a smaller group of people, then the effect is the same, but at that point, the poem might have to explain who the members of the group are. If the "we" consists of just the speaker and the reader, then the poem becomes a much more intimate place as the speaker makes an appeal for unity with the reader.

Second person

The second person is the realm of the you voice, and often writers gravitate to the second person because the pronouns seem to place "you" in the poem, which offers the illusion of closeness. This sense of immediacy a reader might feel toward a poem or its speaker can be a powerful tool in engaging the audience and getting them to feel what you want them to feel. However, understanding why you might use the second person, as well as which second person you want to use, might help you get more work done toward writing a compelling poem. There are so many ways to implement a second person point of view—that could be why the second person is so often misused in creative writing.

Second Person as the Reader: Sometimes in a poem, the you is actually the reader, like one of those "choose your own adventure" books where the reader is the main character of the story. It's tough to put the reader in the poem though—maybe you are in love with a woman but the reader doesn't share that sexual orientation. Or maybe you drive too fast on the freeway and the reader is like, "Hey, wait a minute—I drive the limit." It's not an impossible feat to pull off, but if a poem is a rhetorical structure, then putting the readers' seat at the very center

of the poem is a heavy-handed way of trying to get them to respond emotionally. "You feel sad," you write, and the reader says, "No, I don't feel that."

Second Person as Directed Voice—Specific: While the third person places the reader's seat outside the poem and first person places the reader's seat inside the poem, then the second person is more interested in addressing its voice outward at the reader. Maybe you are explaining how to perform a task or how to get to a certain place. Or perhaps you want to make a direct connection with the reader during a particularly heated moment near the end of the poem, your gaze swiveling from the subject in the poem to the reader to move them closer to the poem.

Alternatively, you might want to address someone or something other than the reader. Maybe you are writing a poem to Abraham Lincoln or Marilyn Monroe or the people in your third grade school picture. Or maybe you are directing your voice at something inanimate like a shipwreck or your childhood neighborhood or your favorite rock band. Regardless of who the voice is directed at, the directed voice knows, or at least has a pretty good idea about, who it is addressing. To not know this is to direct your voice at nothing or no one, which isn't a very good rhetorical strategy. See the Apostrophe section of the anthology for examples of this kind of second person.

Second Person as Directed Voice—Universal You: Sometimes you don't want to talk to a specific person. Instead, you want to direct the voice at the universe, at all of creation. This use of directed voice without any specific target in mind is fine in poetry, but it's often the result of a writer not thinking enough about whom they want their poems to address.

Second Person as Displaced First Person: In short, this point of view is just the speaker talking to itself. There are so many reasons for talking to yourself. You lack confidence and need to talk yourself through an ordeal, you did something stupid, you are embarrassed or angry at yourself, and you wish you could take it back. You feel guilty about something or you can't admit something about yourself so you try to talk yourself into accepting or denying the whole situation. If the first person puts the reader's seat inside the poem and third person puts the reader's seat outside the poem, then the displaced first person removes the speaker from the poem's center and directs its voice at itself.

If someone told you that writing in the second person was a cheap parlor trick to give the illusion of immediacy to the reader, you might ignore them and write in second person anyways because unlike most writers, you understand the nuance of writing in the "you" voice. You don't worry about what those other people say about your you. Instead, you just try to make sure you get as much work out of the POV as you can.

SEE ALSO: APOSTROPHE, GAZE, SPEAKER, VOICE

Precision

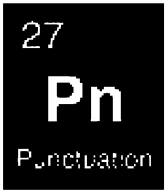
The childhood taunt of “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” is right about sticks and stones, but it vastly underestimates the power of words. The ability to use language effectively is a great power, and everyone knows what Spider-Man says about great power: It brings with it great responsibility. This is the responsibility of the poet: to know language well and to use it with precision.

What you want from your poems when they’re done is that not a word appears out of place and that each word is doing the work you want it to do. This requires an attention to detail and a care with language. This can come during the revision process, but at some point, you’ll need to interrogate each word in your poem to be sure it’s doing what you want it to. This is related to concision, but it’s not just about using as few words as possible; it’s making sure the words you do use are the right words.

You’ll need to develop a keen awareness of the difference between denotation and connotation. Denotation is what a word overtly means—the dictionary definition, essentially. Connotation refers to meanings associated with the word, the social, emotional, or political overtones a word may carry. As a poet, you are accountable for both. Consider the differences, say, between skinny and slender: very similar denotative meanings, but quite different connotative associations, right? Or, imagine for example, a young poet who titles a poem about becoming a father “Choice” without considering that word’s implications in the societal debate about abortion rights. Perhaps the poet had another choice in mind entirely, and perhaps the poem itself makes pretty clear that some other choice is being explored. That does not free the poem or the poet from the inevitable associations some readers will make.

Similarly, words' meanings change over time. This may be self-evident, but it's important to remember. You are writing poems in the twenty-first century; you don't get to pretend the word "gay" doesn't have a different meaning now than it did in the "gay '90s" of the late nineteenth century. If you call women "ladies" in your poetry, you're probably going to have some explaining to do about why you sound like an old-fashioned male banker from the 1920s. If a word in your poem has multiple meanings or particular social implications, you get them all. Typically, we don't get to walk around with our poems and explain that we meant A but not B. So choose your words with care.

SEE ALSO: CLARITY, CONCISION, VALUE, LANGUAGE, WORK



Punctuation

How tempting it is for many young poets to think that writing poetry frees them from the tedium of comma rules and other nonsense having to do with punctuation. And sure . . . kind of. Alas, it does not free you from knowing the standard conventions of written English; it merely frees you from *following* those conventions. But you must do so from a place of knowledge; your disregard for what we've been taught are the rules must be intentional.

Look, all grammar and punctuation rules are made up and somewhat arbitrary. There's no moral imperative to use the comma before the conjunction in a list of items such as Moe, Larry, and Curly; it's just a convention some people have agreed on in order to facilitate communication and clarity. In straightforward prose writing, punctuation should be essentially invisible, not calling attention to itself but serving to guide the reader through the sentences as seamlessly as possible. Periods signal when one clause ends. Commas indicate pauses, slight shifts in thinking. Question marks indicate . . . well, questions. You know how it works. Anyone who reads a lot becomes intuitively familiar with most punctuation conventions, even if you might not remember precisely whether or not the comma belongs inside the quotation marks.

As a poet, of course, you can get away with using punctuation in unconventional ways. But you should do so with an understanding both of the convention you're flouting and of the effect your choices are going to have on your readers. Punctuation, like all the other elements of your writing, is rhetorical. Its presence in a poem has an effect, whether it follows the rules your twelfth-grade teacher drilled into your head or not. Punctuation can help shape both the meaning and rhythm of a poem; they are an important component of syntax.

Our aim here is not to teach you all the significant rules of grammar; there are

plenty of handbooks for that. What's important for a poet is start with learning the rules—but move beyond that to understanding why they are so. It's not enough to memorize where commas go and which nouns to capitalize; it's equally important to know how these rules are intended to aid you in communicating your ideas. That way when you start sprinkling your poems with semicolons and dashes and someone asks what the heck you're doing, you can whip out your poetic license and explain that you're challenging the reader's expectations about the syntactical relationship between ideas.

And speaking of syntax, also consider how a line break can create double meanings in a poem. That's an important rhetorical move that is somewhat dependent on how the poem uses punctuation. The different meanings of the line and sentence can be much more difficult for the reader to parse without effective punctuation to mark the clauses and pauses in the sentence.

If you look at the poems in this book's anthology with an eye specifically toward how they use punctuation and capitalization, you'll see that most of them are pretty standard in their adherence to convention. Just as examples, Cathy Linh Che's "Split" (181–2) and Kamilah Aisha Moon's "After Our Daughter's Autism Diagnosis" (227) each follow pretty standard punctuation rules; in these poems, as in many (probably even most) others in this collection, the job of the punctuation is to be as unobtrusive as possible—periods to indicate the ends of sentences, capital letters to indicate the beginning of the next, and so forth. The poet uses punctuation to provide clarity and straightforwardness; what is challenging in the poem comes from language choice, thematic complexity, and the use of lines and line breaks.

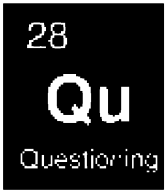
But other poems do things differently. For instance, Gary L. McDowell's "Tell Me Again About the Last Time You Saw Her" (206), Terrance Hayes' "Ode to Stone," and Eileen Myles' "To the Mountains" (167) each forgo punctuation entirely, leaving the readers to negotiation pauses and stops on their own. McDowell uses white space on the page and capital letters that suggest the beginning of a new sentence; Hayes and Myles rely largely on line breaks and concision to create clarity. Layli Long Soldier's "38" (245–9) explicitly acknowledges that it will be following the convention of beginning sentences with capital letters and "ending each one with appropriate punctuation such as a period or a question mark, thus bringing the idea to (momentary) c ompletion." In this manner, the poet places the act of writing in order to shape understanding front and center in her poem.

You'll notice that most contemporary poets tend toward sentence case when it comes to capital letters, capping the first letter of sentences and proper nouns. This is a shift in convention from, say, seventy-five years ago, when most poets, writing in metrical verse that determined line length by syllable count, capitalized the first word of every line, regardless of whether the sentence called for it. Some poets still

do this, as Mary Jo Bang does in “Elegy”; her choice gives the poem an old-fashioned formality on the page, which seems appropriate to the poem’s project. As with most poetic choices you’ll make, there is no right or wrong here—there is only the choice you make and the effect it has on the reading experience. (Whatever you do, don’t capitalize the first word of every line merely because autocorrect does it for you.)

Oh, and one last thing to mention in this section. We ask one thing of you in particular: please, for the love of Emily Dickinson, learn the difference between a hyphen and a dash. The two marks are not interchangeable. All poets should know this distinction.

SEE ALSO: LINES, PRECISION, RHYTHM, SYNTAX



Questioning

What happens in your mind when, as a reader, you come across a question in a poem? Do you automatically fill in a response? Do you expect the poet to provide an answer at some point in the poem? Are you frustrated if there is no such answer to be found? Do you think of the question as a rhetorical device, employed to help the poet make some point about the world? Do you ponder the question for a while after the poem is finished, wondering what the best response might be? Can a poem ask too many questions? Is a poet obligated to provide answers?

It's our job—our calling—as poets to question the world around us. Sometimes that means, quite literally, asking questions in our poems. It's one way we can introduce productive ambiguity into our language. Often, a question serves as a method for drawing the reader into the world of the poem, a sort of forced interaction. As an indication of how integral the act of questioning is to poetry, more than a third of the poems in this anthology contain at least one explicit question, which is pure happenstance, as we did not set out intentionally to find poems with questions in them.

In conversation, we use the phrase "rhetorical question" to refer to a question asked to make a point or raise an issue rather than in expectation of an answer. If you're walking into the dining room reading a text on your phone in one hand with your coffee cup balanced precariously on the edge of your soup bowl in your other hand and you end up spilling your coffee or soup, and your friend says, "Well, what did you think would happen?" your friend isn't literally inquiring about your thought process but making a point about your poor planning. That's a rhetorical question. Well, in poems, all questions are rhetorical: the poet and reader are (likely) not in the same place, so the poet cannot expect an answer. That means the question is in the poem to make some kind of point.

In Major Jackson's "Aubade" (174), the speaker describes a series of possible activities and then inquires, "but isn't this healthier?" This question serves the same purpose as a rhetorical question in a conversation. It draws the reader into the poem as if it were a dialogue, inviting us to consider which side of the equation is, in fact, healthier.

Questions serve to emphasize that a poet is exploring the world rather than revealing it, illustrating that the poet, like the readers, does not have all the answers. Oliver de la Paz asks two consecutive questions in the middle of "Aubade with Bread for the Sparrows" (173). "What's left / but to watch the daylight halved by the glistening ground? / What's left but an empty bag and the dust of bread / ravaged by songsters?" There's a bleakness to the questions, a longing, and a sense that the speaker wants some kind of optimistic answer that is not forthcoming. Matthew Gavin Frank uses questions to similar effect in "After Senza Titolo, 1964," (184–5) asking, "is that / the best we can do?"

When the question is asked not to the general reader but to a particular recipient the poem has established, it offers a kind of intimacy, two characters interacting with each other on the page. Solmaz Sharif asks several questions in her letter poem (250), and as readers we understand that the recipient of the letter would be expected to provide the answers in reply; the questions here drive home the intimacy of the epistolary form and simultaneously emphasize the invasiveness of the redactions, which remove significant words from the heart of the questions. Naomi Shihab Nye similarly asks a question of the addressee of her poem, who is not there to reply (187). Natalie Diaz has another character ask the speaker a question, which she then answers in a surprising fashion: "*Well, what's in the piñata?* they asked. I told them / God was" (191–2). Sherman Alexie, too, uses questions as dialogue between a father and son; the son asks the questions, which go unanswered in the moment being described; the poem itself is the attempt to answer (195). This teaches us something: the best questions to ask in poems are those that cannot be easily answered; to answer would be to shut down the poem, to limit its possibilities. Better, then, to ask and continue asking.

SEE ALSO: EXPLORATION, SURPRISE, SYNTAX, VOICE

Repetition

Repetition is one of the first poetic elements we learn. When we first start writing poems in elementary school, we very often use repetition as way to provide a poem with structure and music. Music scholar and author Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis has argued that, in fact, repetition is the very essence of music; that songs have choruses because a listener gains pleasure from hearing something again. Consider how often we listen to our favorite songs, Margulis suggests; there must be pleasure in the act of revisiting, of rehearing.

There's a kind of comfort in familiarity, and the second time we encounter something we approach it differently, more generously. It's similar to the way standup comedians use callbacks within a routine, and so often the biggest laughs come when the comedian pulls back out a phrase or line from an earlier joke.

When writing poems, we have to move beyond the simple repetition we used in those third grade poems; when a poem returns to language it has already used, the image or phrase should look different. The meaning should be shaped anew by the time we encounter it again. When you bring a poem full circle by repeating an earlier image at the end, the image should carry a new emotional impact.

There's no question that repeating a word or phrase changes our understanding of it. We've all had that experience of writing or saying a word or phrase so many times that it begins to look or sound weird. Margulis suggests having someone repeat a word to you over and over for a few minutes: lollipop, lollipop, lollipop, lollipop, lollipop, lollipop. As we repeat (or re-read or re-hear) the word over and over, the sound of it becomes divorced from its dictionary definition; the syllables become simultaneously more familiar and more strange. This is called the "semantic satiation effect," and it's probably about as good a metaphor as there is for what a poem is doing.

A caution: Watch out for inadvertent repetition in your poems. There are words and phrases we fall back on out of habit, and it's important to watch out for overusing them. If the afternoon light is dancing across the surface of the lake in your first stanza, perhaps the clouds should be doing something other than dancing across the sky in your second stanza—unless the repetition of dancing is part of the point. In that case, you want to make sure that whatever you're repeating deserves it; that your "chorus" stands up to the increased scrutiny it faces by appearing repeatedly in your poem. In our made-up example, you could for sure find a better, more surprising verb than dancing.

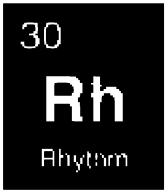
Margulis likens repetition in music to rituals such as those performed in religious ceremonies, say. Rituals may be either physical or verbal, and by their nature are participatory both for the actors and for those observing them. The repetition of ritual behavior gives the action a larger meaning. That is, the flipping of a coin before a football game does more than decide which team receives the ball first; it also links the football games to all other games that have begun the same way; it signals to the crowd and the players that the game is about to begin. The action has a practical purpose, but it's also ceremonial, decorative, meaning-making. The repetition of the act enlarges it. The same is true of repetition in poetry: the words have one purpose within the sentence or line or syntactical unit, but when the poet repeats them, they become larger, more meaningful.

One of the effects repetition can have is a sort of numbing effect. When Patricia Lockwood (176–9) begins each sentence with the same clause—"The rape joke is"—we begin to grow desensitized to the phrase. The phrase, at first shocking, becomes familiar, which is of course part of the project of the poem, to explore the place of that phrase in our culture, to consider the oxymoronic nature of the idea of a "rape joke" in the first place. Repeating the same words at the beginning of a series of clauses is a particular kind of repetition called anaphora, from the Greek for "carrying back." It lends emphasis to the repeated words, of course, and often has the effect of creating a sort of litany or an almost religious sort of recitation. It often forces a strong rhythm on a poem. A similar role is played by epistrophe, which refers to the repetition of words at the end of a series of clauses, lines, or stanzas.

Another way poets often use repetition is to establish expectations only to thwart them by later breaking the pattern. It's a pretty standard way to achieve surprise in your poems. Major Jackson's "Aubade" (174) opens its first two stanzas with "You could be," establishing both a rhythm and a theme of musing, but he then breaks the pattern and moves into the present tense, calling attention to the difference between what could be happening and what is. Richard Blanco's "One Today" (222–4) returns again and again to the word "one," suggesting American individuality and independence—and making it all the more significant when he

ends the poem not with a focus on the singular but on the collective, on the strength of collaboration.

SEE ALSO: ENDINGS, MUSIC, RHYTHM, SURPRISE



Rhythm

Rhythm refers to pattern, to pacing, to structure. It's an essential part of music and poetry; it's also innately human. Think about the rhythms of the body: our breathing, our pulse, our cycles of sleeping and waking. There's comfort in rhythm, in patterns. They create predictability, stability. For a poet, rhythm is also about controlling the speed of a poem: how quickly do you want your readers to advance through each line? Where do you want the readers to linger longest? The more you develop a sense of your work's rhythm, the better able you will be to make use of it.

In many kinds of formal poetry, a certain rhythm is inherent in the form. Sonnets are traditionally written in iambic pentameter. Iambic refers to a pattern of emphasis: an iamb is a metrical "foot," which is two syllables, the first unstressed, the second stressed. Pentameter means the line consists of five feet (10 syllables). Here's the famous line that opens Shakespeare's Sonnet 130:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun.

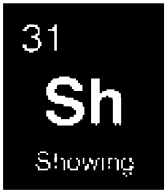
If you break the line down into metrical feet, you see the pattern: my MIS/tress' EYES/are NUH/thing LIKE/the SUN. (This kind of examination of a line's stresses is called scansion.) Of course when we read the line out loud naturally, we don't hit the stresses quite that hard. But they're still there, and they establish the poem's rhythm.

Even in free verse, poems have a rhythm. It may not be as predictable as iambic pentameter, and often poets deliberately fight against sing-songiness. There is no one rhythm that poems should be striving for; each poem establishes its own pattern of music and repetition. What's important is to think of rhythm as fulfilling a rhetorical function: it's part of how you shape your reader's experience with your

poem. Perhaps your poem is best served by an easy, smooth rhythm; perhaps you want a more halting poem full of interruptions and starting over.

The word rhythm comes from the Greek for “measured motion,” and that’s a helpful way for a poet to think about it. This is in part why we advise you to read your work aloud during the revision process: to hear its patterns and points of emphasis, to better understand its rhythm and to help it find the motion that suits it best.

SEE ALSO: MUSIC, SYNTAX



Showing and Telling

If you've ever taken a writing class or read a book of advice about writing, it's almost certain that someone has told you "show, don't tell" in your writing. In general, this is excellent advice, encouraging the use of image over abstraction, of evoking rather than merely explaining. The job of the poet is not simply *tell* the reader that the cherry trees are in bloom, but to *show* those trees in all their light and brilliance. Bring the blossoms to life on the page through sense details: colors, smells, and sounds.

However, sometimes telling is perfectly appropriate. Sometimes a deftly handled abstraction is every bit as effective as a beautifully rendered image. It's important that a poet not rely exclusively on telling or on abstractions, to be sur e. But a poem that is entirely image and sense description risks being contextless and static; it risks failing to explore the implications of its subject. What you want for your poems is to find just the right balance between showing and telling. Alas, there's no simple formula that can tell us just what that balance is: 75 percent show, 25 percent tell, and voila! No, each poem requires its own negotiation between these two elements.

Consider these lines from Ross Gay's "Ode to Buttoning and Unbuttoning My Shirt" (231–2) which came after the poet has skillfully evoked the tactile sensation of buttoning a shirt: "in terms of joy / this is not something to be taken lightly." There's nary a concrete, specific detail in these lines; clearly, they tell instead of showing. But this move is effective because it enlarges the poem; it shifts from observation to interpretation. By making a straightforward assertion about the effect of the experience, the poem practically dares us to disagree.

You'll see lots of poets use that strategy: making plainspoken claims about the nature of the world. Kiki Petrosinio writes "No music / in the world except / what I

jaw." David Kirby asserts, "Somebody always finds out" (214–5) Colette Arrand: "Few are born to cast lots, but who does this stop?" (241). Such telling moments can be effective because there is a comfort in reading such certainty; sometimes we like being told what to think, we appreciate the possibility that we've just read a bit of wisdom we can carry with us. Often such moments are the most quoted lines from a poem.

As a reader, though, you are always faced with the question of how seriously to take these claims; often these moments are undercut, or at least complicated, by the images around them. It's as if the speaker is making a pronouncement to try it out, to see if it still feels right after saying it aloud. Perhaps, the poet is stating the claim as a kind of hypothesis which the rest of the poem then tests: poem as scientific method.

What we're asking here is for you to reject the oversimplification that showing is good, telling is bad. Each has its place; each is an element of poetry, with its own rhetorical effect. The more you read and the more you write, the better skilled you will become at deploying each to maximum effect.

SEE ALSO: IMAGE, SURPRISE, VALUE

Speaker

There is a tendency among readers to think of poetry as “true.” That is, the speaker of any poem is the poet herself, and what happens in a poem happened in real life. The belief is rooted in the way many of us are taught poetry: that each line should be parsed for its relationship to the speaker’s life or to historical events. A teacher tells his students biographical details of Emily Dickinson’s life so that we can know what her poems are “really about.”

This notion is mostly hogwash. It’s also, frankly, a bit insulting to both poet and audience. It discounts the role of imagination and empathy in the writing process, suggesting that all a poet does is dress up actual events in fancy language. It limits the reading experience to finding clues that points to the poet’s life story. So repeat after us: The speaker is not the author. The speaker is not the author. The speaker is not the author.

Once you’ve accepted this, it has implications for you both as a reader and a writer of poetry. As a reader, it means you don’t need to know the poet’s life story to engage with the poem. Instead, what you engage with is the words on the page. The poem itself should contain everything you need to have an experience with it. Yes, of course, sometimes knowing something about the poet can shape your reading experience in particular ways, even enriching it, but it should not be *necessary* to the poem. As a poet, it frees you up to invent and fabricate, to fit your story to the language, not the other way around. The speaker can be you, or not you, or partially you and partially an invention. Yes, you can lie in your poems!

There’s no doubt that sometimes a poem invites the reader to think of it as autobiographical. Patricia Lockwood’s “Rape Joke” (176–9), for example, attracted a lot of attention when it was first published in an online journal, *The Awl*, and most responses tended to assume the author was writing from personal

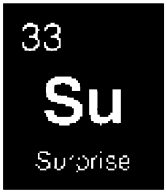
experience. Lockwood mentioned this reaction in interviews, and told *The Rumpus*: "Part of the purpose of a poem like this is to take the target out of yourself and put it up on the wall. It's a method of distancing, of detachment. . . . Making an object out of your suffering allows you to be objective about it." In other words, Lockwood's personal experiences are one thing, and the poem is something else. They might overlap, certainly—many of our best poems are drawn from our most powerful life experiences, whether positive or negative—but they are not the same, and the degree to which they overlap isn't important to the reading experience.

It's also important to remember that even when you are writing about yourself and the details of your poem come straight from your life, you are still creating a version of yourself on the page. The word "persona" comes from the Latin for "mask," and every speaker you create is in some way a mask. Backing up from poetry for a moment, think about the many masks we wear in our everyday lives. The person you are when you're on a first date might not be exactly the person you are when you're having Sunday dinner with your grandmother, and that in turn might not be the person you are when you're in a diner having coffee and pancakes with your best friends at 3:00 a.m. on a Friday night. There's nothing wrong with having these various personas; it's part of having different relationships with different people.

Similarly, the self you present on the page in a particular poem is merely one facet of yourself. If you're writing about an argument you had with your father about politics, you might not draw much on the version of yourself that collects military memorabilia or binge-watches *Gilmore Girls*. Or maybe you do mention those versions, but you don't spend much time on the self that spent hours drawing horses in third grade or played goalkeeper for your seventh grade soccer team. You get the idea. We all contain multitudes, as Walt Whitman observed, and no poem is going to represent all of them—which means that you are making choices about the self you present on the page, which means that self is a persona. Even when the speaker is the poet, the speaker is not *entirely* the poet.

Sometimes, of course, the speaker is not the poet at all. Sometimes, as in the persona poems in this anthology, the poet openly inhabits another character, whether real or invented, and uses that voice as a lens through which to explore the world. Writing in a full-on persona can be a freeing experience, allowing a poet to let go of the burden of being oneself for a while and explore the world incognito. And once in a while, approaching a subject as if you were someone else entirely allows you to be even more truthful than usual about how you see the world.

SEE ALSO: LANGUAGE, VOICE



Surprise

One of the things we want most as readers is to be surprised. We crave something different than we expected, something we didn't even know was possible. We want what we read to expand our notion of what is possible. When reading poetry, that desire applies to language: we want poems to use language in ways that are surprising, fresh, original. We want to encounter phrases that we've never seen before—and yet that still hit home, that give us that feeling of yes, this is exactly how to express that idea.

One of the things this means is that poets should avoid relying on clichés. This is not new advice, and this is probably not the first time you've been told that. But it's worth spending a second on why clichés damage your poems. Some clichés become clichés because they are overused; we use them in our everyday communication as a shorthand for complex ideas. But as shorthand, they lose the precision poets want from their language. They become an abstraction of an idea rather than the idea itself. Also, many clichés fall into the easy, expected emotion of sentimentality, which is basically the antonym of surprise: "The sun will come out tomorrow," "Love is blind," "If you love someone, set them free," etc.

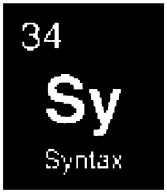
We don't mean surprise here as in a big twist at the end of your poem like the one at the end of an episode of the cartoon *Scooby-Doo*, when the heroes pulled off the mask and we learned that the museum curator had been the bad guy all along. It's easy to change the rules without notice, to reveal in the last line that the poem we all thought was a love poem was about your family dog, or that your speaker has been dead the whole time. This is the cheapest form of surprise, and even if you pull it off, it harms your poem because it works only the first time we read it. There's no reason to revisit such a poem once you've learned its big secret. This, of course, is the opposite of what a good poem should do, which is to invite and

reward multiple readings.

The twentieth-century film director Alfred Hitchcock made distinction between this kind of easy surprise and what he termed suspense, a far more meaningful storytelling device. Surprise is blowing something up at the end of a scene when the viewer has no idea the explosion is coming; suspense is when the viewer knows full well the explosion is coming but must wait out the scene in anxious expectation. This second version of the scene is more satisfying and more complex. For a poet, this means don't be coy. Writing that poem about your dog is a risky move because we all love our pets but no one else much cares; if you do insist on writing about Fido, it's far better to let us know up front that this is the subject of the poem. That forces you to deal with the subject head on and do the challenging, meaningful work of making your reader care, rather than ducking that task by withholding the important information until the end.

Philosopher Kenneth Burke referred to form in art as the establishment and fulfillment of desires in the audience. From the first word a reader encounters, that reader begins to form expectations about the poem that follows. Your job as a poet is to be aware of these expectations and to manage them. Sometimes you'll meet them, sometimes you'll thwart them. You never want your poems to be predictable, but sometimes you want the poem to feel inevitable. The best moments in any poem are those that are both surprising and inevitable.

SEE ALSO: METAPHOR, VALUE



Syntax

If diction refers to the words we choose, syntax is the order in which we put those words. How we build our sentences, in other words. The line might get most of the attention, but the poetic sentence is also essential to writing successful poems.

Let's back up: What is a sentence? Many of us were taught some definition like these in elementary school:

"A sentence is a complete thought."

Or, possibly, something along the lines of "a sentence is a grammatical unit that features a subject and verb and can stand alone."

The first definition is, of course, unintentionally ludicrous: How can any thought ever be complete? (In some ways, this perhaps is the very nature and beauty of poetry: the attempt to set down a complete thought in language pitted against the impossibility of that task.) The second definition feels pretty close to truth, but leaves us at a loss when we come across a fragment that seems to do the same work as a sentence but lacks the grammatical bona fides. Besides, what does it mean to stand alone? Surely nearly all sentences gain strength from the sentences around them.

In the end, trying to define a sentence with any clarity, concision, or certainty becomes a slippery, near-impossible task. We end up with something like this: A sentence is almost any word or series of words that starts with a capital letter and ends with a period (or question mark, or exclamation point). And of course sometimes poets forgo the capital letters or the punctuation, rendering even this broad definition inadequate.

Let's back up again: What is the purpose of a sentence? Harkening back once more to grade school language arts classes, we might hazily recall being taught the four types of sentences: declarative, imperative, interrogative, exclamatory. These

four types help us identify sentences by the work they do: make a statement, give a command, ask a question, make a statement with more-than-usual gusto. Now we're getting somewhere. As poets, we should always be asking of our language, "What work are you doing?" We've discussed how words in poetry do different kinds of work and evoke multiple layers of meaning. So, too, must the best poetic sentences do double (or triple or quintuple) work. Statements, commands, questions, emphatic statements; this is the stuff of effective syntax.

It doesn't matter all that much to our life of writing poems whether we can successfully provide that perfect definition of a sentence. What matters is how we use the sentence. It's a way of grouping words that work together. This grouping is how we make meaning. This is syntax.

Many poems take a fairly standard approach to the sentence, as in Major Jackson's "Aubade" (174) or Billy Collin's "Introduction Poetry" (169), just to name two examples. Many poets use fragments that aren't technically sentences grammatically but serve the same purpose. All list poems do this effectively, for instance. Bob Hicok's "Elegy with lies" (189) also relies on fragments that give the poem a sense of constant interruption and re-starting. Reading through this anthology, you will see immense variety in the approach to the sentence. You'll find long sentences (even, in the case of Ross Gay's poem (231–2), a sentence that meanders the entire length of the poem) and short sentences. Patricia Lockwood (176–9) and Layli Long Soldier (245–9) turn to the sentence as its own sort of line. You'll see a variety of approaches to line-sentence interplay, sometimes even within single poems.

For some reason, many young poets have the idea that a tortured syntax can make their language seem more poetic: "Toward thee, I send this kiss," or the like. Some of this comes from reading too many rhyming poems where the poet twisted their words into a Yoda-like utterance in order to get the right words at the ends of the lines. If you're doing this, you're doing your poems and your readers no favors. In the end, as with the other elements in this book, you must bear in mind that syntax must be purposeful. As you write and revise, be mindful of the way arranging your words creates meaning and shapes both voice and rhythm. Be aware of whether your syntax eases the reader through the poem or creates a stumbling block. You don't want your syntax interfering with your poem.

SEE ALSO: DICTION, LANGUAGE, MUSIC, REPETITION

Titles

Titles can be hard to write. No sugarcoating it. But they're so important. The aims of a title are manifold:

- **They must get our attention.** Imagine a reader browsing the table of contents in a literary journal or an anthology; the title offers that reader the first indication of what a poem might be up to and whether they might find it interesting.
- **They must entice us to read more.** A successful title engages the reader's intellectual or emotional curiosity.
- **They must be meaningful in their own right.** Again, the best titles are themselves a line of poetry (even if a short line, sometimes a single word), offering a kind of weight and gravity all their own.
- **They must stand the test of time.** Like a poem itself, a good title should pay off more with more reflection and re-reading. Even when we revisit the title after completing our initial reading of the poem, it's nice to find something fresh waiting there—the meaning of the title evolved somehow by the experience of reading the poem.

Imagine opening a poetry journal and seeing this table of contents:

"Feelings" 1
"How I Love You" 2
"Love Sweet Love" 3
"To My Girlfriend" 4
"Love Is Kind" 5
"Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem" 6

Based on the titles alone, most readers are flipping straight to page 6. Matthew Olzmann's title (203) is clever, thought-provoking, unexpected. It gets your attention and immediately raises questions about the poem that will follow it. How is this going to be a Mountain Dew commercial? What's going on with that disguise? So is this a love poem or isn't it? What makes the title successful is more than ostentation, however. All of these questions are not answered simply once we've read the poem. Rather, the reader is left to ponder their nuances and complexities.

Titles matter not just because they help your poem stand out in a table of contents, but also for how they help guide the reader. A good title contributes to the reading experience of a poem and helps shape meaning. Olzmann's title fits that bill, too—it offers a frame for the poem, a kind of reading context that helps you understand what you're getting into as you begin reading. Then, once you've finished the poem, you can return to the title with fresh understanding. If the aim of the poem is to help us see the world in a new way, our experience with the title is a microcosm of that: we see it one way before we read the poem and another way after. In other words, a successful title can't be merely flashy, like a clickbait headline that promises more than the story delivers. The title needs to set a high bar for the poem—and then the poem has to clear that bar with ease.

Too often, young poets fall back on abstractions for their titles: "Grief," "Joy," etc. This is not a good approach. Often it reveals a conceptual problem with the poem itself: you're taking on too much, trying to explore a vast abstract concept instead of focusing on specific experience, images, details, language. Or sometimes such a title sits atop an otherwise successful poem and completely undersells it. In that case, you just need to rethink your approach to the title.

As with all things, the key to a strong title for your poem is to think rhetorically. What experience are you trying to create for your reader? How does the title help you shape that experience? Also as with all the elements in this book, the key to writing better titles is to read more. The more titles you read, the stronger your sense of what titles can do will become.

Let's look at some of the poem titles from this anthology and explore what they teach us about titling strategy.

Title as Mode: Some titles serve as a seemingly plainspoken label of the poem's form or mode. There are sonnets called simply "Sonnet" and sestinas titled "Sestina." In this anthology, you'll find Traci Brimhall's "Ars Poetica" (170), (219–20) Major Jackson's "Aubade" (174), and both Li-Young Lee's (221) and Kiki Petrosino's "Nocturne," among others. There's something almost defiant in the simplicity of these titles, and of course the poems themselves are far from simple. It's as if the poets use their titles to lure us in with the idea that the world

can be so straightforwardly represented, but of course the poems belie that notion.

Narrative Title: Sometimes the title itself tells a story. Examples include Karyna McGlynn's "I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl" (205), Tarfia Faizullah's "Aubade Ending with the Death of a Mosquito" (175), Christina Olson's "In Which Christina Imagines That Different Types of Alcohol Are Men and She Is Seeing Them All" (218), and Colette Arrand's "For Jake 'The Snake' Roberts, on the Occasion of Making an Unlikely Out in Centerfield During a Charity Softball Game" (241). In each of these cases, the title does a lot of the narrative heavy lifting for the poem, thus freeing the poem up to be lyrical and evocative. As readers we get the plot, as it were, from the title, while the text of the poem moves more associatively than chronologically.

Title as Topic: Natasha Trethewey's "History Lesson" (183) and Sandra Beasley's "Halloween"(228) are examples of apparently simple titles that provide a brief frame for the poem that follows. They are evidence that a title need not be long or complex to be compelling and evocative. Notice that Beasley never explicitly mentions the holiday in her poem; she doesn't have to, because the title has done this work for her.

Title as Evocative Detail or Phrase: Often, a poet chooses a compelling word, detail, or phrase from their poem to use as the title: Maggie Smith's "Good Bones" (209). Anders Carlson-Wee's "Dynamite" (216), and Brian Turner's "Horses" (123) employ this approach. It's a form of repetition, and doing so calls particular attention to that detail, creating a familiarity when readers encounter that part of the poem and strongly suggesting that the detail in question is doing work on both literal and metaphorical levels.

Title as Necessary to Understanding the Poem: Sometimes the title provides a kind of frame that the poem needs in order to make sense at all. The list poems and how-to poems in particular rely in this kind of title: Danez Smith's "alternate names for black boys" (199) and Catie Rosemurgy's "Things That Didn't Work" (200) both use the title to establish the connection between the listed items within the poems; without the titles, these poems lose most of their meaning. The same is true of the found poems, ekphrastic poems, and the self-portraits, wherein the title provides important guidance for the reader.

These are not the only titling strategies, of course. Sometimes the title serves as the first line of the poem, leading right into the text grammatically. Sometimes the title offers a kind of mystery that doesn't make sense until the reader finishes reading the poem. Sometimes the title argues against the poem. Some poets find a title in lines they've cut during the revision process. For many poets, the title comes early in the process, occasionally even before the poem itself. For others, titles are most often added very late, after the poem is otherwise complete. When you're in this situation and stuck, try writing twenty-five titles for your poem, each

doing some different kind of work. You might not be fully satisfied with any of the twenty-five, but you'll begin to get a sense of the possibilities and of which approach might be most meaningful.

SEE ALSO: BEGINNINGS, WORK

Value

Everything in a poem has value: the creation of metaphors, the use of images, the specific diction, the choice of speaker—all of these must add value if a poem is to be an efficient organism. In the chapter on revision, we cover the necessity of putting each word in a poem on trial for its life. What we mean there is that for each word in your poem, you should be asking: What is the value of this word? That value can be measured in three ways: a word's usefulness to the sentence or structure of the poem; its worth to the poem's multiple layers of meaning; and finally, its correspondence to the words around it in the poem.

Mechanical value

Each component of a poem must do work for the poem. It has a function in the poem that is rhetorical or mechanical, maybe both. In Hoagland's "Jet" (213), the wish in the first line has a mechanical value—it starts the poem. But it also has a rhetorical value in that it establishes the speaker's desire, the wistfulness for the back porch, the old friends and the alcohol. Because poems are such concise structures, things in a poem that are not useful, things without mechanical or rhetorical purpose, can often be cut without much effect on the poem.

Associative value

That 1935 Bronko Nagurski football card has a monetary value in six digits because it is rare and because card collectors covet it. That boomerang your grandfather carved when he was eleven has no monetary value but it reminds you of the time he tried to teach you how to whittle and you had to get five stitches in your thumb. That dragon insignia tattooed on your shoulder blade has a Chinese cultural significance rooted in strength and luck. These values are not inherent but

associative, having to do with each item's connections to other things in the world.

Likewise, the significance of a piece of language often comes from how it connects with other language. This is true of allusions, for instance. And connotations are attached to denotations: a psychiatrist is someone who provides counseling and therapy services, but to call a psychiatrist a shrink invokes a feeling of belittlement, a negative value attached to word describing a medical professional. "Fireflies" in Hoagland's poem is a word that simply denotes a species of insect, but it has a connotation that is different from "lightning bugs" or "winged bioluminescent beetles." The associations a word calls up for its reader help determine its value.

Value as comparison

Sometimes the language gains value by how it compares or contrasts with other language. Words can accrue value from the material surrounding it. See, for example, the way the sniper in Jamaal May's "The Gun Joke" (253) takes on the value of fire—the house is on fire and snipers fire guns. Or maybe it's the other way around. We are waiting for gunfire throughout the poem and then when the firefighters appear, they are immediately in opposition to the sniper. This sort of comparative value is recursive, each word adding value to the other—and through that value, each changing the meaning of the other.

Redefinition and variable value

The things in poems have values, then, but those values are not necessarily constant. Once value is established, the poem can make rhetorical moves that change or create additional value. The storm at the beginning of Eugenia Leigh's "Recognizing Lightning" (172) is dangerous and causes the speaker's sister to shrink in fear, but that value evolves. By the end of the poem, after the speaker comforts her sister and finally calls B on the phone, the storm has become a potential for growth through the poem that the speaker will write about the incident. The storm is defined at the beginning and redefined at the end, taking on an additional value.

Back to "Jet": the sky becomes the river, which becomes that "effervescent gush" all sparkly and fluid, and then in the next stanza, the fireflies are in the grass. The image of the night sky is now superimposed over the grass, and the reader can trace the value being transferred from point to point, developing as the comparisons build upon one another.

Questions about value?

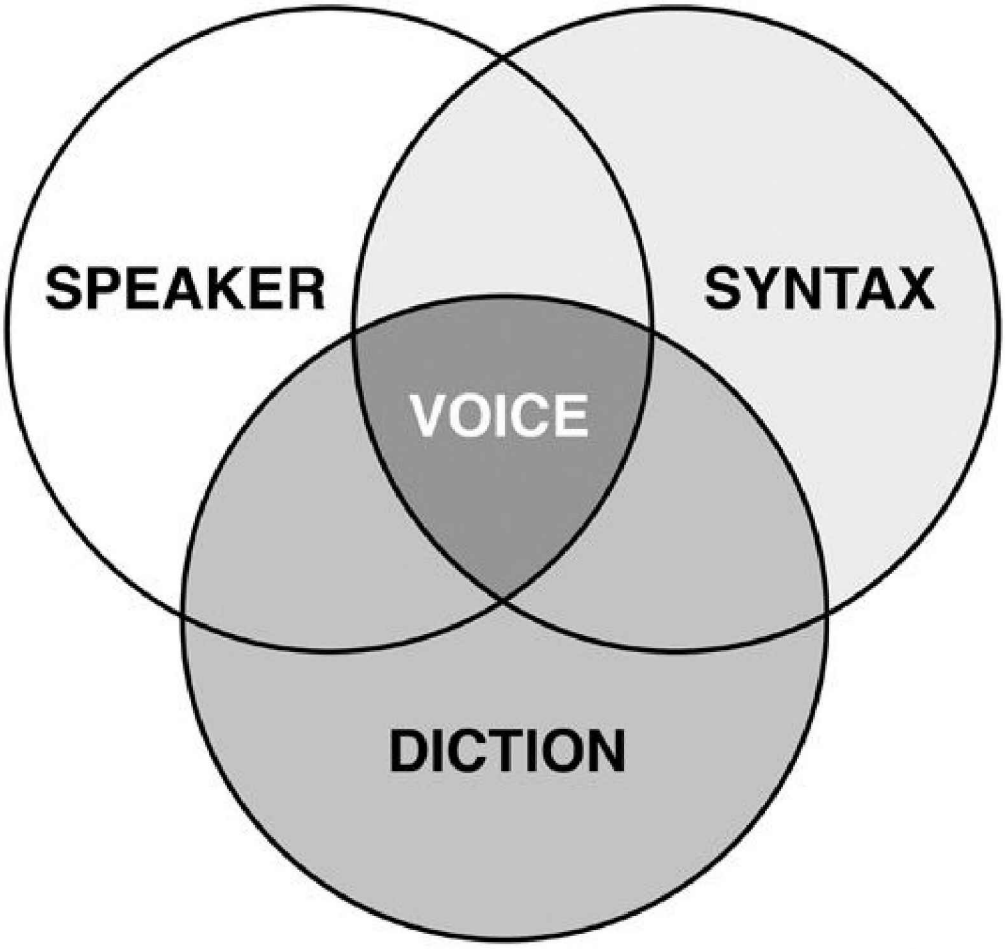
In workshop, we can ask questions about value in order to explore all of these things: the usefulness of a line break, the worth of an image, the figurative value of a phrase. In asking the question, the workshop can focus on the rhetorical work of

one particular moment in a poem in order to better understand how the poem works and how to make the poem more efficient on the page.

SEE ALSO: IMAGE, INVENTORY, METAPHOR, MOVEMENT (TURN)

Voice

Find your voice, many young writers are told, but it's not always clear just what that means. It's a metaphor, because the advice-giver does not mean the physical human voice, with its particular range and volume and timbre, but the voice on the page. The task of "finding your voice" can be a daunting one indeed for a beginning writer. Hard to find your voice if you have only a vague sense of what that means in practical terms. Try this: If you make a Venn diagram featuring circles for diction, syntax, and speaker, voice would be the intersecting area of those circles. The words you choose, the order in which you put them, and the personality of your poem—that's voice.



Voice is an important element of poetry, to be sure. But if you're being yourself on the page, it's not something you need to stress out over. Our advice? Don't worry about it. Focus on using language with precision; aim for concision; balance clarity of expression with the ambiguity of the human experience. That's plenty to wrestle with for now. Then worry about finding your voice later—like, much, much later, say after you've written 200 or 2000 or even 20,000 poems.

In the meantime, pay attention to what voice looks like on the page as you read. First, try to describe the voice of the poem you're reading. Does the speaker come across as confident, wise, happy? Sad, resigned, strong, caring? Uncertain, open-minded, passionate? Then try to pin down specifically what it is in the language that gives you that impression. This is part of being a rhetorically savvy reader, part of reading the way a writer reads.

Let's consider a few examples. A voice can be wry and matter-of-fact like Billy Collins' speaker in "Introduction to Poetry" (169). It can be tender and verging on desperate like Solmaz Sharif's letter-writer in the section from "Reaching

Guantanamo" (250). It can be funny and meandering like David Kirby's storyteller in "Teacher of the Year" (214–5).

But how do these poets render these voices? Collins uses everyday vocabulary and straightforward, declarative sentences of a similar, medium length, combined with almost-silly physical images (dropping a mouse into a poem, waterskiing across its surface). Sharif asks lots of questions and discusses intimate personal details (and the withholding of those details with the redactions only emphasizes their importance). Kirby uses long sentences with lots of "and"s, a few well-timed exclamation points, and conversational colloqualisms such as "Ummmm" and "Hmmm" and "sex stuff."

Subject matter also influences voice. Collins is writing about a teacher's mild frustration with his students; Sharif is writing about the devastating effect of military action on a family relationship; and Kirby is relating a sordid bit of gossip about a professor caught behaving badly. Each of these topics fits exactly into the described voice. That's because voice is a way of getting to know the speaker, and what concerns us, what moves us to write—subject matter, in other words—these are closely connected to who we are and how we choose to express ourselves in the world.

The lesson here is that voice is not some ethereal concept that can't be easily defined; rather, it's simply the cumulative effect of how the various elements of poetry come together on the page. The more you learn to pay attention to these elements as you read and in your own writing, the more confident you will become in manipulating them to good effect in your poems. That's when you'll find your voice.

SEE ALSO: DICTION, LANGUAGE, PRECISION, SPEAKER, SYNTAX

Work

This word is shorthand for efficient rhetorical work. Poems are sharp, succinct things that have to work efficiently if they are to maintain both concision and clarity. The easiest level to examine is mechanical work, the way that language and grammar operate in a poem on a purely nuts and bolts sense. The photo in Natasha Trethewey's "History Lesson" (183) is the canvas for the whole poem and the title of "Nocturne" by Li-Young Lee (221) simply tells the reader how to read the poem that is about to follow. But work is more than just mechanics—language in poems also does both ornamental and rhetorical work, both important things to consider in a rhetorical construction.

When something is called flowery, it's generally a comment on a thing's decorativeness. The tulips are beautiful flowers, the sunshine is a pleasant sensation, and the gargoyle's grin is delightfully mischievous. The flowers are on the table at supper time: they look nice, but they might take up room on the table that might be better used as a spot for the gravy boat or the sweet potatoes. Sunshine feels nice, particularly when it's cool out and you are sitting near the window. And that gargoyle perched on the side of the building is better than looking at a blank wall. There is sometimes a tendency in young writers to want to use flowery language and images, but you do not want your words to be purely ornamental. This results in poems that are more cosmetic dressings than textual art.

When something in a poem connects with the reader in a way that appeals to logos, pathos, and/or ethos, the poem is doing rhetorical work. The parts of the poem are working together toward the goal of the poem's overall rhetorical construction. This is important because that's the goal of the poem—to create rhetorical appeals to the reader in ways that will deliver whatever emotional experience the writer is trying to convey.

Sometimes the ornamental quality of a thing might actually do rhetorical work, which would be an indicator that there is good, efficient poem-making happening on the page. The tulips on the table hide a hole in the table cloth. The sunshine in the window is a relief after the long Michigan winter. And that gargoyle—it actually serves as a ward against evil spirits.

There are lots of moments that do both ornamental and rhetorical work in the Anthology of this book. For example, see the long paragraph that Aimee Nezhukumatathil builds in the middle of "One-Star Reviews of the Great Wall of China" (193). It creates a wall in the poem about the wall, but it also does rhythmic work with those long sentences in the middle of so many short ones. In Ander Monson's "Inventory Elegy 3: The Dirty Entry" (201), the racy photo of "you undressed" works as our entry into the poem and sets the mood in stark contrast to the poem's elegiac mode. Then as the poem moves forward, the value of that image turns dark as the poem builds its inventory and proceeds through a slow reveal of the story of what happened. Or see the way the lines in Tarfia Faizullah's "Aubade ending with the Death of a Mosquito" (175) get split into two columns; this creates a contrapuntal reading experience—each column can be read as a separate poem, making it three poems in one. It looks cool, and more meaningfully, it also creates three completely different reading experiences for the reader.

Density

Poems are always about at least two things, partly because that's how metaphor operates, but also because of ornamental and rhetorical work. When a poem is making efficient use of the reader's time, when it's doing work on multiple levels simultaneously, we say that the poem has density. A poem that is at once rhetorical and ornamental has density. The more threads per inch a poem has, the more work a poem is getting done at one time. And the more work a poem can get done at one time, the more efficient it can be in conveying meaning to the reader.

The opposite of density is thinness. A thin poem doesn't do enough work. There might be moves that are purely ornamental, or there might be several lines where the poem might not be multitasking as it needs to in order to give the reader a complex experience with the subject matter.

Questions about work?

In a workshop, we might ask the room, "what work does *(x)* do?" In this question, *(x)* is the image of a naked polaroid, of balloons at a birthday party, or of the moon. When the workshop asks what work is being done, the conversation is being steered toward specific moments in the poem in search of how those moments create meaning, as well as how efficient that work might be.

SEE ALSO: CLARITY. DICTION, IMAGE, VALUE

Section III

Practicalities

8

The Poetry Workshop

Chapter Outline

Three levels of understanding
The conversation is for the writer
The conversation is for the room
Tips for a good workshop
About “the gag rule”
Processing workshop feedback
Coping with an unsuccessful workshop

If you are enrolled in a poetry writing class, then you are probably going to be doing a poetry workshop sooner or later. A workshop is a group conversation during which writers critique one another’s work. It’s generally a directed conversation led by the workshop leader (usually a teacher of some kind), and in most cases, the writer remains quiet and listens to the discussion. It’s like a test drive for the poem during which everyone takes it out for a spin and then reports back on how the poem handled in bad weather, how well the poem accelerated on the freeway, and what kinds of funny sounds rattled under the hood at a stoplight. The workshop is a way for writers to come together and explore poems, offering one another encouragement, commiseration, and support through the common language of poetry.

The first time you have a poem workshopped, it can feel a bit intimidating. You are bringing your work in and people are going to discuss it in front of you. Moreover, in your first workshops, conversations can feel awkward because you might not know how to talk to other people about writing, much less about poems. Here are some things to remember about the workshop, both so you can be prepared to have your poem workshopped and so you can be a good workshopper.

Three levels of understanding

If the workshop is to have a conversation about a poem, that means that workshop participants must have read and understand the poem enough to have an intelligent, sustained conversation. The workshop leader will generally keep the conversation moving in a productive direction without too many unhelpful digressions or pointless repetition, but a successful poetry workshop needs everyone involved. You should begin by working to understand each poem on three separate levels.

First level of understanding: I like it / I don't like it

The most basic way of understanding a poem is at the level of whether you like it. Liking or disliking a poem requires little thought about anything other than the self. Maybe you don't like poems about horses or you don't like poems that take place in foreign countries. Maybe you don't like poems at all, in which case you should probably put this book down right now and go do math problems or something. But deciding that you like or dislike a poem requires little to no critical thought about the poem, and can be a quick choice made before even one word has been read. Understanding that stops at this level isn't a helpful way of reading a poem for workshop. It's okay if you don't like a poem for whatever reasons you have for disliking it, but don't make that decision and stop reading or thinking because there is more to reading poems than this simple first level of understanding.

Second level of understanding: This is what the poem means

Readers are interested in a poem's meaning because if it means nothing, then there isn't much point to reading it, much less talking about it. So naturally, as we read a poem, we try to make meaning out of what the poem offers up—isolating and analyzing symbols, looking for metaphors, thinking about sociopolitical contexts, all in service of trying to figure out what the poem is trying to say to us.

Understanding what a poem means isn't restricted to the ideas it is trying to convey, however. A workshop might also focus on the emotional journey a poem takes, pointing out the moments in the poem that elicit emotional reactions from readers. Or it might investigate the different questions that the poem raises, either explicitly or implicitly. To accomplish this, a reader might make comparisons to other poems, consider the genre if there is one, or even look up words, their origins, and their alternate meanings. All of this is to say that a poem is up to something on the page, and this second level of understanding means that the reader can grapple with that something in a conversation. If we can't discern a poem's meaning or what we think it's trying to do, we might end up talking ourselves in circles with nothing specific or important to say about the poem.

This second level of understanding is the general realm of most classes in

English literature and/or poetry appreciation. It's something that a creative writing class tackles in a workshop, to be sure, but consideration of a poem's meaning is a waypoint in the workshop conversation, not the ultimate destination.

Third level of understanding: This is how meaning has been built

Once we have an idea of what the poem means or what the poem is trying to do, we can start thinking about how meaning is created in poem. The elements of poetry not only provide the writer with an idea of the many different tools and building blocks for crafting a poem—they also offer the reader a way of thinking about the choices the writer has made to create meaning. It's these choices the writer has made in syntax, diction, concrete imagery, sound, and so forth that are at the heart of a creative writing workshop as the group talks about how the poem accomplishes what it does. How do the images in "alternate names for black boys" by Danez Smith (199) create a different emotional response in each line of the poem? How does sentence structure in "Aubade Ending with the Death of a Mosquito" by Tarfia Faizullah (175) work to make the double columns work? How does the extraordinary length of "Rape Joke" (176–9) by Patricia Lockwood serve to enhance and complicate the poem's emotional effects? If a young poet can understand the effects that writerly choices have on how a reader understands and experiences a poem, then that young poet can try to use that knowledge in the writing and revising of their own poems.

The conversation is for the writer

A primary goal of the workshop is to help the writer understand how the poem is working and how to revise it into a better poem. The group focuses its attention on the text, not the writer, and as the group talks, their individual reactions are supposed to be helpful in terms of isolating problems, offering different readings and helping generate possible ideas for revision. Additionally, the workshop leader usually offers commentary and criticism to help move the conversation into the places it needs to go so that the writer can get the best feedback possible during the session.

The conversation is for the room

One criticism of the workshop model is that sometimes workshop participants lack the experience, knowledge, and background to be able to have a good conversation for the writer. Some argue that students can't get past the first and second levels of understanding, which makes for conversations that are limited in terms of how they can offer the writer revision suggestions that will be helpful. Moreover, some young poets don't have enough confidence in their ability to respond to poems,

which makes it difficult for them to participate in the conversation even when they might have helpful things to contribute.

In this sense, it's important to recognize that the workshop isn't just a conversation for the writer—it's also a conversation for the group as a whole. Some young poets make the mistake of assuming that there is nothing for them to learn about poetry in a workshop unless their poem is on the table. You don't have a poem being workshopped—why even show up, right? Well, as the group works through a poem in conversation, people are formulating ideas for themselves not just about how the poem at hand works, but about how poems work in general. It's important to remember that your poem's workshop is not just an advice-giving session about one poem—it's a learning experience for the room as new knowledge is created through the exchange of ideas in the workshop. Learning how to respond to a poem is an important part of any poet's development.

Thoughtful, active workshop participation will help you become a stronger reader of other people's poems. Being a stronger reader in turn makes you a stronger writer. You become more aware of how language works, and you gain a keener sense of the effects various rhetorical elements have on readers. The more poems you read, the more you understand what a finished poem looks like—and what a poem looks like when it has rough edges that still need smoothing. Obviously, these new ways of seeing poems are things you then take back to your own poems. When you can begin to anticipate what your classmates are going to say about your poems, that's an indicator that you have begun to hone your awareness of audience—and how your poems will interact with readers once you send them out into the world.

Tips for a good workshop

A poetry workshop is a collaborative activity that depends on the willingness and generosity of the people in the room to work. In great part, the workshop is only as good as the people who participate in it. The workshop leader can work to bring the best practices out of workshop participants, but it's up to the group to create an environment in which a conversation about poetry can be good for the writer as well as the room. Here are some tips to help you make your workshop the best it can be.

Make the workshop a safe space

Being part of a workshop means that you have entered into a community that values safety, both in terms of being a writer and a reader. A young poet has to believe that their work is safe in the hands of the workshop, that no one will needlessly tear it down, and that no one in the room is judging their talent as

writers or human beings. Similarly, each member of the group has to feel as though their contributions to the conversation are welcome and respected even if they are viewpoints with which some might disagree. Writers need this kind of safety in order to feel free to unashamedly write the poems they want to write. The group needs this kind of safety so they can respond critically without being afraid of hurting someone's feelings. Safety comes from trust, so as you workshop, consider the different ways in which you and your peers might work to inspire trust in one another.

Be nice

This should be a no-brainer. Most people don't engage in creative writing to make enemies. It's a lot more fun to make friends. At the least, you'll want to avoid hurting anyone's feelings. Remember that you are engaged with another person's hard work, and being overly critical doesn't help the conversation reach the writer. Some people claim to be straight shooters, throwing out harsh comments in the name of "calling it like they see it." Really, those people are just jerks. Don't be a jerk. It's good advice in life, and it's good advice in your poetry workshop.

Be forgiving

We have all said things before that we wish we could take back. Maybe it was a joke that didn't land right or a statement that was worded in a way that came off as harsh or mean. Even if the workshop is safe, someone might say something that comes across as cruel. If it happens over and over, maybe there is a pattern of behavior that needs to be addressed. However, more often than not, people don't say things in workshop to hurt one another. It's better for the workshop to try to forgive people when they misspeak rather than hold a grudge and try to take revenge when it comes time to workshop their poems.

This also means taking criticism in the way that it is generally intended. The things people say about poems in workshop are aimed at helping the writer understand the different ways the poem might need revision. Workshop is meant to be helpful and supportive, so when your work is being covered in class, try to accept the feedback as such. Keep in mind that like you, your classmates are doing the best they can to make sense of poetry, both as readers and as poets. A comment that strikes the wrong note is more likely to come from a place of inexperience than a place of malice.

Be generous with your critique

Being nice is good for the workshop atmosphere, but it's just as important that the writer understands how the poem is working for readers. Generosity means assuming that the writer did the best they could with the draft in front of you—and that they have the talent and drive to make it better with revision. Generosity

means pointing out the strengths of a poem as well as areas that might offer opportunities for improvement. Generosity means reading the poem carefully, more than once, and being willing to think about the poem in specific terms, using the elements of poetry as a foundation for commentary. Don't be afraid to get into someone else's poems and grapple with the different ways that it's working on the page or in the air, how the text creates meaning and how reading it aloud generates music and rhythm. You respond to your classmates' poems with generosity because it makes you a better, more thoughtful reader and a valuable member of the workshop community—and also because the workshop will respond in kind when it's time to look at your poems.

Try to read the poem on its own terms

It's tough to step outside of your opinion about the things you like and dislike in the world. If I don't like poems about professional wrestling, then it might be difficult to read a poem about Hulk Hogan without flinching. Or if I don't know anything about contemporary pop music, I might have to work pretty hard to figure out how to respond to a poem that relies on phrases from "Single Ladies" by Beyoncé. But as poetry workshop participants, the benchmark isn't whether or not we like the poem.

Taking this one step further, when you encounter a poem outside your own worldview or experiences, it's important that you don't try to force it to conform to your own worldview. A poem by a young man who has recently come out as gay to his parents or a poem by a young woman from Mexico using Spanish language and slang offer up experiences that might not be immediately accessible to straight, white audiences. The easy route here is to ask the poems to conform to the "normal" standard set by the workshop, which could be detrimental to the poem and frustrating for the writers—it devalues the writers' experiences and disrespects the work they have done to bring the poem to the group.

Instead, consider this question: What is the poem trying to do? Only after understanding the answer to that question can we ask the follow up: How might the poem do what it's trying to do better than it is now?

Describe the poem instead of prescribing a fix

The workshop metaphor implies that the task at hand is to "fix" a poem, the way you'd fix a broken lawnmower engine in a real-world workshop. There are a couple of problems with this approach. It's not that you shouldn't have an opinion about what should be done to a poem—in fact, when you encounter poems in workshop that don't seem to be quite working like they should, you should be thinking about how you might proceed if it was your poem because that's one of the ways we learn how to write poems.

But in workshop, it's not your poem to rewrite in your voice with your vision and aesthetic. The poem belongs to its writer, and the writer alone gets to decide what happens in the revision process. By simply prescribing fixes to a poem, you imply that (a) there is something wrong with the poem and (b) that "something" is a problem that can be solved like changing the air filter in your car or checking the dictionary for a spelling error. This turns the conversation into a troubleshooting session that is more about telling the writer what to do rather than engaging with the poem at hand.

If, however, the members of a workshop can root their discussion in describing how they perceive the poem and what they think it's trying to do, then the writer gets a better idea of how the poem is being read by the people in the workshop. As different readings emerge in discussion, the writer can start to formulate possibilities for themselves. Note that this doesn't mean that you can't offer suggestions as to how you might see the poem's revision going, but it's important that this kind of thing is rooted in being a conversation about possibilities for the poem's bright future rather than diagnosis and corrective surgery. Workshop readers don't get to make demands of the poet or to say definitively what a poem "needs" in order to succeed.

Listen and take notes

The writer should try to avoid becoming defensive during the conversation about their poem. There might be an instinctual need to rise up from the chair to defend one's artistic vision, but that isn't helpful. The poem has to go out into the world and live on its own without its writer to stick up for it and explain its brilliance. So think of workshop as a test of how well it can live on its own, and instead of arguing with your workshop, take notes about what they say so you can remember the conversation later. Take notes about the positive things people say as well as the negative or constructive suggestions. We all tend to forget the positive feedback, but we need to know what we have done to good effect as well as what we could do better.

Moreover, you might want to take notes when it's not your poem being workshopped. This might help you use workshop to become a better reader of your own work. Write down everything because you never know what will be helpful to you when you sit down to revise.

Give praise

There's an unfortunate tendency to think of honest feedback as being "brutally honest," but giving someone feedback on a poem is more than calling out what isn't working. Make it a point to highlight the moments in a poem that you found most engaging, elements you saw that you'd like to see more of, and lines that you

found yourself thinking about later. Not only does this make it easier for the writer to receive criticism, but it's also part of trying to understand what the poem is trying to do and talking about how it goes about trying to achieve its goals.

Write on other people's poems

Don't be afraid to write on the hard copy of someone's poems. You should be making marginalia as you read. Where are you confused about the poem's meaning? Where does the poem make you feel some kind of emotional response? What suggestions do you have about things like line breaks, image, or metaphor? This kind of marginalia can help you remember what your experience was like the first time you read the poem, as well as what you wanted to say to the writer at that moment, and it can help the writer understand how the poem is affecting its readers.

Remember that the poem is a draft

In order to write a good poem, sometimes a writer has to start by writing a truly awful draft. If a poem seems like it's appropriating another culture, like it's being disrespectful to people of color, or like it's too grounded in the male gaze, then the workshop can cover those things. If the poem's metaphor is askew or if the language is overwrought, or if there is embarrassingly too much sex, then the workshop can explore those things, too. Of course, ideally the writer has discovered these kinds of things and has course corrected before the poem makes it to workshop. The important thing to remember is that the poem is a draft and a young poet needs to be allowed to make mistakes in drafts in order to learn how to circumvent them in the future.

Because the poems in workshops are drafts, try not to hold people accountable for the mistakes they have made. This young poet isn't a terrible poet because she brings really awful drafts to class for workshop. She is no less talented or skillful than anyone else in the room—instead, think of her simply as a young poet who brings some rough drafts to workshop and wants to make those poems better. That young poet isn't sexist because his poem contains a line that objectifies a woman—instead, think of the poem as having a moment where it might be unaware of what it's doing, point it out, and let the writer take care of it in revision.

About "the gag rule"

Traditionally, the workshop operates under "the gag rule." It sounds awful, but it's really just a somewhat gruesome metaphor for saying that the writer remains silent while the rest of the group talks about the poem.

When the writer is a silent participant, it allows them to observe the conversation that surrounds the poem, taking notes about what was said in order to have a record

for later. The group has a conversation about what the poem is saying, or what it's trying to say, and the writer gets the chance to see how the conversation aligns with their writerly intentions.

In addition, the silent writer feels less pressure to defend the poem—really, there should be nothing to defend because the conversation shouldn't be an attack. Yet sometimes as the conversation unfolds, the writer notices things they wish they could change or feels embarrassed about something in the draft. If the writer is allowed to interject apologies, explanations, or disclaimers into the workshop, they can disrupt the exchange of ideas and possibly obstruct the conversation for the room before it has a chance to develop.

The gag rule can be an important part of the workshop's machinery, and it's certainly traditional, but there are also reasons that some workshops might choose to do away with it altogether. For example, some people hold that the writer is the most important participant in the w orkshop, and that to silence the writer is to risk letting the workshop to run without the writer getting the very best feedback they can from the group. But note that this example privileges the conversation for the writer over the conversation for the room. It presupposes that removing the gag rule will help establish parameters for the conversation that will be helpful to the writer, but those parameters might not allow the conversation for the room to develop naturally, and it might keep the discussion focused on micro-level issues having to do with a particular line or phrase and less about more substantive macro-level issues.

The gag rule can become problematic, too, when the workshop is not a homogeneous group. When the workshop is made up of people from varied backgrounds, people of different races, cultures, gender identities, sexualities, social classes, and so forth, the conversation can become one in which the group tries to isolate problems in a poem rooted in experiences they may know nothing about. And let's face it: the workshop is rarely a homogeneous group.

The problem is exacerbated when most of a class is from a similar demographic and a few writers bring a different perspective and lived experience than the majority of their classmates. If a young poet is the only Japanese American in the workshop and he brings in a poem about the internment of American citizens during the Second World War, the workshop might read it and know nothing about this. Someone says "teach me more about the historical event." Someone else says "try to make the food more exotic and Japanese." Someone says, "take out the Japanese words because I don't understand them." The gag rule has the writer sitting there unable to tell his workshop that the poem is not a history lesson, that Japanese food is not exotic, that the Japanese words are the words of his grandfather who refused to speak English after the war. In this scenario and cases like it, the gag rule actually interferes with both conversations, preventing the

writer from getting the feedback they want and the room from delving deeper into a conversation about a poem from an unfamiliar viewpoint.

So the gag rule has the potential for letting the conversation for the room run roughshod over the conversation for the writer and can prevent the conversation for the room from meeting a poem on its own ground. Without the gag rule, however, the conversation for the writer can get in the way of the conversation for the room and focus might be too much on the writer and less on the poem itself. Regardless of how a particular workshop leader wants to proceed, it's up to that leader and everyone in the room to decide on ground rules to ensure that both conversations get the appropriate attention.

Processing workshop feedback

After a workshop, you will have lots of stuff to look at. There might be notes from each person in the workshop, copies of your poem with marginalia, and there likely will be feedback from the workshop leader. There will be so many opinions and comments from your peers that it can become overwhelming. As you look at your materials post workshop, consider the following tips.

Don't simply look for consensus

One of the things that frustrate young poets after a workshop is the multitude of voices offering feedback, all those people talking and none of them agreeing on what is best for the poem. It's okay if the advice you receive is in conflict with itself. The goal of a workshop isn't necessarily to reach consensus about how the poem works, and you are probably going to find lots of conflicting opinions afterwards. If everyone agrees that the end rhymes are distracting from the imagery in the poem, that might be something you should look at. But a workshop is not an election in which the opinion receiving the most votes determines what you do with your poem. To look for consensus above all else is to turn the complex and nuanced conversations of the workshop into a search for poems that appeal to a lowest common denominator, and that's not helpful to anyone.

Filter the workshop's voices

Part of being in a workshop is learning who you want to listen to in terms of taking advice about writing poems. The worst thing you could do is go through all the advice your workshop has given you and try to incorporate every single thing each member of the group has said. This doesn't mean that you should just look for voices that you agree with or voices that confirm what you are already thinking about the poem. Instead, think about the voices in the workshop that you trust, the voices who are the most thoughtful in conversation, and try to listen to those voices first.

Look past the advice

You're going to get a ton of advice in workshop. Some of it will be tweaks to language, and some of it will suggest changes that might alter the identity of the poem as you understand it. Don't just take advice blindly. Think about who gave the advice and why taking that advice is the best thing for the poem.

Most importantly, think about why the advice was given. Advice is given in reaction to a problem perceived by the reader, so it's important that you think about what that problem might be. If someone is suggesting that you could cut the third stanza of your poem because it repeats information from stanza two, but you think it's doing some other work entirely, the real problem might be that your language lacks precision. Understanding what someone saw as a problem in your poem might help you understand whether the advice is helpful to your vision of the poem. Knowing the problem might even lead you to an easier solution than the workshop suggested. Or you might decide that the problem isn't actually a problem at all.

Get some distance

You don't have to leave workshop inspired to get down to work revising your poem. Sometimes, sure, you're fired up and ready to go. But it's sometimes helpful to put the poem away for a bit before trying to revise. A week, two weeks, a few months, a year: this is why it can be important to take notes during workshop so you have a record of what was said and how the conversation went. With distance, sometimes you can get some clarity on how people were responding to your poem and you can come at those workshop comments and have a better idea of what they mean for you in the revision process.

Coping with an unsuccessful workshop

One day, you might have a workshop that isn't satisfying. Maybe the workshop focused too much attention on one thing and the conversation was repetitive. Maybe the workshop got off topic and the group spent time debating something other than your poem. There are lots of reasons that a workshop can feel like it was unsuccessful, and usually the best thing you can do is talk to your workshop leader.

The workshop leader might not be aware that you are feeling like the workshop didn't go well, at which point it might be helpful to talk to that person and voice your feelings. Generally, a workshop leader wants to know when participants feel like their workshops weren't useful and will want to do w hat is needed to get the workshop working for you and the rest of the group.

If you are nervous about approaching your workshop leader, take another workshop member with you for moral support and to corroborate your feelings.

You don't have to storm into the room and gang up on the workshop leader—in fact, never gang up on anyone because it puts them into a defensive position and you won't find your audience receptive to what you have to say. Workshop leaders want the workshop to be a positive experience for everyone involved, and if you talk to them about your negative experiences, they will generally want to talk you through your problems and get the workshop back on track.

Or if you feel like the workshop isn't working for you and your poems, it might be that you are in the wrong workshop with the wrong people. This is a problem if, say, you're enrolled in a semester-long college course with nothing to do but grin and bear it for sixteen weeks. In this case, you need to focus on what you can do to get something valuable from the experience. Focus on being a better reader of other people's work. Focus on writing the poems you want to write despite the workshop's feedback. And continue to listen. Don't shut off the possibility that some of the feedback can be meaningful, even if much of it is not.

9

Revision

Chapter Outline

Revision = Re + Vision
Letting go is the hardest part
Revising the almost-good-enough poem
Save your drafts
Read to revise
Revision techniques and exercises

One of the most common questions young poets have about writing poems: How do you know when a poem is done?

The flippant answer is also, in this case, the true answer: you don't.

It's possible to revise and revise a poem and never be sure when you've reached the right place to stop. Indeed, it's possible to make a poem worse by revising it. It's also true that some poems come out pretty darn close to right the first time. Such poems are rare, however, and should be considered gifts from the muses (or, at least, a reward for all the hard work you've done wrestling with poems that refused to cooperate). For most poems, revision is required.

The trick, of course, is that when a poem is finished, it appears inevitable. On the page, the poem looks to its readers as though it must have emerged fully formed from its maker, like Athena from Zeus' skull. Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib's "Ode to Jay-Z, Ending in the Rattle of a Fiend's Teeth" (229) is so intricately assembled that it's difficult to imagine the poem existing in any other shape. David Kirby's "Teacher of the Year" (214–5) appears effortless, conversational, meandering, offering the illusion that the speaker is thinking as he goes. This is the point. This is what you're working toward. That appearance of effortlessness. The cliché about not wanting to know how the sausage is made applies here; the reader

doesn't need to know about the effort it took for a poet to get the words in their final order.

But effort is required. Revision is very much part of the deal. With rare exceptions, the poems that look inevitable on the page arrived in that place only after passing through numerous revisions. In her book on writing, *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott famously describes the "shitty first drafts" a writer must create in order to get to stronger, more polished writing:

> The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. . . . Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you never would have gotten to by more rational, grown up means.

For the young poet, this should be a freeing concept: not only is it permissible for our first drafts to be crude or confused or subpar, it's practically required. Remember that your favorite writers write junk, too. Many of your favorite poems probably started as incoherent, half-formed thoughts.

Revision = Re + Vision

The question, then, is how does one get from here to there? How do you transform your initial pile of words into the poem you want them to be? The first step toward a successful revision process is being able to turn fresh eyes on the initial draft: to re-vision, in other words.

Once upon a time, Albert Einstein famously said, "the significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them." In a similar vein, the poet Mary Oliver writes in *The Poetry Handbook*:

> One of the difficult tasks of rewriting is to separate yourself sufficiently from the origins of the poem—your own personal connections to it. Without this separation, it is hard for the writer to judge whether the written piece has all the information it needs—the details, after all, are so vivid in your mind.

It can feel impossible to figure out how to look at the poem with fresh eyes, to achieve Einstein's new level of thinking so you can find the new poem in the old one. But much as writing a poem in the first place is an act of seeing the world in a new way, the revision process requires being willing to see the poem itself in a new way, being willing to see the first draft as raw material with which to work.

The revision process can be—should be, even must be—every bit as imaginative and playful as the process of creating the original draft. The same sorts of invention activities that we use to get started on a poem belong in the revision

process as well. It's essential not to think of revising as editing: tweaking a word or two here or there, adjusting a few line breaks or punctuation marks. The revision process should be far more immersive than that, at least as focused on the big picture of the poem as on the small-picture details.

Copy editing and proofreading can be done all along, and are essential to the process; a poem with typos or even small errors in grammar or word choice is sunk. But making micro-level changes is decidedly not revision.

Letting go is the hardest part

We all get unreasonably attached to our first drafts. Once we've written something down, changing it is hard. There's a reason William Faulkner said that writers must be able to "kill your darlings." Often it is our favorite line or phrase that most needs to be done away with, or it is the piece of the poem that was its initial catalyst.

The challenge is in letting go, not only of the shape and content of the first draft on the page, but also of the initial impulse that got you started on the poem. The poem you wanted to write, the poem you thought you were writing, the mindset you had while writing—it might no longer matter. What matters is the material on the page. You have to learn to listen to the language, to let it go where it wants to, even if it's not where you first thought you'd end up. In fact, *especially* then. A poem that achieves exactly what you first set out to achieve, says exactly what you wanted to say—well, that's often a poem that fails. It's said that the end of a poem must be both inevitable and surprising, and "both" is the key word there. One without the other is death. A poem that knows where it's going and heads there directly, as if with blinders on the whole way, is sure to fail.

William Wordsworth's oft-quoted definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" does us no favors when excerpted this way. Young poets who are resistant to revision lament the loss of that spontaneity and protest that revising a poem takes away something magical that can happen only in a first draft. But Wordsworth continues, positing that a poem "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" and that writing a poem requires a poet to "think long and deeply" in order to make sense of those powerful feelings. In other words, a poem must capture that spontaneous magic, but it must additionally temper that spontaneity with the kind of reflection that happens later, during the revision process. What you thought the poem was, no longer matters. Your revising self owes your drafting self nothing; your focus must be on the poem in front of you a nd not on what you now think you probably meant when you first sat down. It's okay if the poem changes. It's okay if the poem ends up being something you never intended to write. In fact, it's probably inevitable.

Revision is work, and hard work at that. It's also where the magic happens. So

don't let our natural aversion to work dissuade you from engaging in the process, and don't let fidelity to your original ideas become an excuse for not pushing your poem as far as you can push it.

Revising the almost-good-enough poem

Sometimes you know your first draft is junk. Maybe you had to write the poem in the twenty-five minutes before it was due in class. Maybe you were distracted by a fight with your roommate or a call from your mother or a midterm chemistry exam and simply weren't in a good place to write poetry. Those first drafts are usually pretty easy to let go of, and the revision process is pretty easy to jump into—really, it's just continuing what you started.

What we're talking about here are the harder ones to take on. The poems that are pretty solid. Maybe even good, or at least almost good. Maybe even good enough to earn an A in class. And yet maybe not great. Maybe not fully the poem it should be. This is when letting go of that initial draft is the hardest, when entering the revision process can be the most daunting.

Often, our resistance to revision is about fear. Fear that we're not capable of making the poem any better. Fear that we'll do a lot of work and the poem *still* won't be great. So, yes, revision requires a certain amount of courage. Willingness to fail and to flail about in the poem for a while. Willingness to plow ahead even if you're not sure what the result will be. It also requires a kind of faith in yourself as a writer, a trust that you are in fact good enough to get the poem where it needs to be eventually. Even if you feel you haven't yet earned that faith at this early stage of your writing career, have faith in the process. Trust that revision works.

And don't settle. Don't settle for almost good, or good enough. Don't settle for a poem that will get you an A. Making an A in a poetry class isn't all that hard. You know what's hard? Writing a poem that will change the way someone else sees the world, and that's what you should be aiming for.

Save your drafts

One of the great things about writing poems in the twenty-first century is the ease technology brings to revision. Want to see how your poem looks as a prose poem? A tall, skinny poem with three-word lines? A contrapuntal poem? You can try any of them, try all of them with a few clicks on your keyboard. You can print out every version and compare them. Now imagine how challenging that would be on, say, a typewriter, if you had to type out each version one at a time? Or rewrite them all by hand with your giant feather-tipped quill, working by candlelight?

Changing your poems on the fly with Microsoft Word or some other word-

processing software is exceedingly simple. This simplicity, though, should not be considered a substitute for careful consideration—Wordsworth's deep thought. Just because you can make a poem contrapuntal by hitting tab every so often doesn't mean it's right for the poem. You still need to think about the relationship between form and content, the connections or deliberate disconnections between the shape of the poem on the page and the words it's employing.

Some poets still handwrite their initial drafts and then move to a computer for revising and finalizing. Others compose on the computer from the beginning. Some poets draft in notebooks, either collecting lines and fragments, or writing out near-complete drafts young poets should try each way to figure out what works for them. Writing a poem out by hand creates an entirely different relationship with your words than does typing them into a blank document. Even if you're more comfortable composing on the computer directly, consider handwriting drafts at some point in the process. Something about making your body physically involved in the process of creating the poem can trigger some new way of considering the poem. Composing directly on a computer blurs the line between writing and revising, as you're continually backspacing, changing, deleting, cutting, and pasting. Writing a poem out by hand is more linear, more one stage at a time. Either way has its costs and benefits.

One other thing technology offers that's an incredible boon to the poet: the ability to save every draft. You should save and save often. If you find yourself taking out a line that you rather like but no longer need in the current poem, save it somewhere. Create a file just for such murdered darlings, and then when you're stuck on the next poem, you'll have a file full of potential starting places.

In addition, for the young poet who does not want to revise a piece they've become attached to in its initial form, this is a great way to free yourself: save the original draft. Tell yourself this new document doesn't matter; you're just playing. Knowing that original draft is back there, safe and sound in its own file and that nothing you do now can affect it. That frees you up to play, to dabble, to pull apart and reassemble, all with impunity. With such freedom from the worry that you'll somehow harm the original poem, you will quite often find that you like where you end up.

Read to revise

As with starting your poems, reading can often be an essential part of the revision process. In fact, you can deliberately make it so by using successful poems as your own troubleshooting guide. All the challenges we face as we revise poems have been faced by other poets, and we can learn from how they navigated the hurdles. Stuck on the last line of your poem? Read the ending of every single poem in this

book, and you'll see sixty possibilities for how to end a poem. Want to end on an image, a question, a philosophical comment? Look for poems that do so and figure out how they made it work. The same process can help with first lines, line breaks, formal structures, thematic considerations. This kind of purposeful reading can be really productive. It leads you to see all previously existing poems as models, as examples of how poems work.

Reading before you begin revising can also help you get into the right frame of mind for the work. Even reading poems that are nothing like your own, or nothing like the one currently in front of you, can remind you of what poems can do, what they can be, what effect they have on a reader. If you often find yourself sitting down at your appointed revision time but simply starting at your drafts, unable to get started, consider starting each revision session by reading for ten minutes. Read poems that are old favorites or poems that are new to you. Read poems you love or poems that challenge you. This is a great way to transition from "life mode" to "poet mode," from the self that's thinking about what's for dinner or the cable bill or what's going on next weekend to the self that's ready to buckle down and make art.

Revision techniques and exercises

Revising is hard work, and every poem you write will require that you employ different strategies for revision because they are different poems with different structures and different goals. There isn't a universal system for doing revision, and you shouldn't trust anyone who insists that there is—but here are some activities that might help you get out of that same old level of thinking you used to draft your poems so you can get down to some serious revision.

- **Distance:** Give yourself some space from your poems. Often, the revision process—and that letting go—demands a fresh perspective. If you're struggling with a poem, put it away for a while. A week, a month, six months. Longer, if necessary. When you come back to it, you'll be a different person, and it will be easier to turn an objective eye on what isn't working, what could be stronger. (Note that when you're writing a poem in the context of a class, this isn't always possible. End-of-semester deadlines are sure to get in the way. Nonetheless, at the least consider this a call to avoid procrastination; the earlier you write your poems, the more time you'll have to work on them—or to set them aside before returning to them with clear eyes.)
- **Immersion:** This is the exact opposite of the previous technique! Print a copy of your poem and carry it around with you so that you can pull it out and read it whenever you get a free moment. Post a copy over your desk. Use a copy as

the bookmark for the novel you're reading. Just as when you read the same word over and over, it can begin to appear so strange it doesn't even seem like a real word anymore, so too can your poem begin to feel strange through this intense contact. As you spend more time with your poem, your relationship with it will evolve in unexpected ways and you will begin to see new possibilities.

- **Inversion:** If you're not sure what do with a poem, try rewriting it in reverse order: that is, last line first, next-to-last line second, and so on, ending with what had been the opening line. A couple effects are sure to result: First, you'll find grammatical and syntactical oddities in the new ways the lines connect. Some will be nonsensical, but others might be compelling and offer new insight into how your words are working together. Second, your poem will take on a new kind of logic. No longer will the story proceed from beginning to end, or the argument from premise to conclusion. Inverting the order of things can lead you to surprising new connections between ideas and images. That surprise is what you're after. If inverting doesn't get you where you want, try printing out the lines, cutting them apart, and then shuffling them into random new orders. The point here is not that turning a poem upside down or inside out will magically lead to a new, finished piece of writing, but that it will help free you from your original intentions; that it will help spark some new way of seeing the language.
- **Write Between the Lines:** On your word processor, put an extra return between each line of your poem—then write new lines that fit into those spaces. Focus less on stretching out these new lines to fit grammatically and more on making new thematic or narrative or imagistic connections between the original lines. The point is not to end up with a bloated, wordier version of the original poem, but to stretch your conception of the poem into something new.
- **Cut It in Half:** Try writing the exact same poem in half the number of lines. What is lost? Was it necessary? Maybe it was; if so, put it back in. At least now you know you need it, right? Try cutting a poem by more than half. What happens when you try to take out 70 percent of the words? That's the aim here: Try stuff and see what happens. You'll learn something about your poem every time you do.
- **Poke for Soft Spots:** This one is essential for any revision process. You know how when you go for a dental examination, the dentist or the hygienist takes one of those pointy instruments and jabs into each tooth one at a time, checking for soft spots? You need to do the same thing with each word in your poem. Check for abstractions that should be replaced with concrete, specific images. Check for clichés that should be excised entirely. Check for words

you've unintentionally used more than once. Check for expected moves or familiar phrasings—if your frog hops, could he slide or pulse or plod instead? If you find yourself using phrases you've read or heard before, rewrite them into something more original.

- **Read to Yourself:** Read your poems aloud to yourself. Listen for words that don't sound right next to each other. Pay attention to places where you stumble; that's often a sign the line or phrase isn't quite right yet. Do this often, with every draft.
- **Read to Someone Else:** Find someone willing to listen to you. It doesn't have to be a fellow poet; sometimes it's better if it's not. Ask what they heard, what they noticed as you read, places where their attention waned, places where they were most engaged. Ask where you sounded most confident.
- **Have Someone Else Read It to You:** Give your poem to a friend so you can listen to your words in someone else's mouth. Listen for moments that don't sound like you think they should, or moments where your friend's voice falters or stumbles—take a look at these areas for possible revision.
- **Write It From Memory:** After you've been working on a poem for a while, try rewriting it from memory. It's best to do this when it has been at least a couple of days since you've looked at the poem. Then compare the two versions. Which parts match between the two versions? Which phrases are better in the original? Which came out better in the new version? If you forgot some parts, ask yourself why. Are they necessary? Or did their omission hurt the poem?
- **Write As Someone Else:** Ask yourself: "How would _____ revise this poem?" It would be quite a different poem if Maggie Smith wrote it than if Danez Smith did, right? So pick a poet and try to channel their voice, their vision, their sense of form. Rewrite your poem through that lens. Try doing this with multiple poets; try it with both Maggie Smith *and* Danez Smith. In the end, you'll have to make the poem your own, written in your voice and capturing your particular vision of the world, but trying on someone else's point of view for a while can teach you a lot about your own.
- **Stretch to Fit:** Similar to trying out another poet's voice, it can also be fruitful to stretch your poem over the framework of another poem. Try writing it, say, in the split lines of Karyna McGlynn's "I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl" (157); that would force you to pay attention to those places where the form places emphasis. Alternatively, reimagine your poem in a series of narrow couplets in the manner of Matthew Gavin Frank's "After Senza Titolo, 1964" (184–5), or a numbered list a la Danez Smith's "alternate names for black boys" (199). Any of these forms would draw attention to different components of your poem, would force your language to fit into new molds.

> Just as imitation can be inventive, can be a starting place for w riting poem, it can also be a valuable part of the revision process.

Not one of these revision techniques or exercises should be expected to be the magic pill that you can swallow and wake up with a new, perfect poem. You might try several of them with any given draft before hitting on the right one. Sometimes, no exercise will yield the result you're seeking, and the poem will need to be revised painstakingly, a word or phrase or line at a time. Sometimes revision will lead to an entirely new poem, which is its own kind of magic when it happens, but that original draft will still be there, waiting for you when you're done.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to revision, just as there is no one-size-fits-all poem. The key is to remain inventive, imaginative, and playful. Be willing to do the work that the poem demands. Accept the false starts and dead ends as inevitable parts of the process.

Back to the question that opened this chapter: How do you know when a poem is done? The answer comes from knowing that you've invested yourself fully in it; that you have explored and exhausted as many possibilities for the poem as you can image; that you have read enough poems and written enough poems to recognize a poem when you see it.

10

Proceed with Caution

There are so many ways a poem can go wrong, just as there are so many ways cooking a meal, building a deck, and going on a first date can go wrong. It's okay when a poem goes wrong, but it's sometimes a good idea to understand where the pitfalls are ahead of time. No one wants to discover they have cooked up the meal that is just a dry piece of leathery meat. No one wants to be the dude who built the deck made entirely of cheap lumber. No one wants to be the person who took someone on the first date that ended alone at the Burger King drive-thru at 7:30 p.m. So here are some poems for you to beware of.

THE POEM THAT IS A TRICKY RIDDLE: There was that time in tenth grade when your English teacher dropped a bunch of Emily Dickinson poems on your desk and said, "Figure these out—good luck!" But a contemporary poem generally creates an experience for the reader, and that's difficult to do when the poem is busy playing a game of hide-and-seek with the reader, showing what it's about for a moment before hiding itself away to make the reader figure out what's going on. It might be fun to tease the reader with clues as to what the poem is about: the sound of a traffic jam in the sky, a snowy gust across the lawn, the fading sunlight to the right—oh, the poem is about geese flying south for the winter! Maybe it's clever, maybe it's not, but in choosing to focus on creating a riddle for the reader, the young poet might miss the opportunity to write a poem that says something interesting about migrating birds. Shoot for clarity and honesty because otherwise, the poem is driven by the reader's infuriating need to figure out what it's about rather than creating a nuanced reading experience for the audience.

THE POEM WITH THE SURPRISE ENDING: Oh, it's from the dog's point of view! Oh, the speaker has been dead all along! It's the easiest thing in the world to change the rules at the end of the poem, or to withhold some key bit of information until the dramatic reveal, but that's not really fair to the reader—imagine if you

were watching a detective movie and at the end, everyone but our hero takes off their masks to reveal that everyone is a robot. Or a romantic comedy that ends with a twist: Mr. Right is a serial killer and the whole movie has just been a plot to lure our girl into his trap. It's also not a good idea. A poem needs an element of surprise, but not to the point that the poem is dishonest and tricks the reader. Poems that over-rely on a big twist might be fun to write, and they *might* be fun for the reader once, but they lack staying power and the emotional or intellectual richness that the best poems must offer. Poems that depend on their surprise ending do not reward re-reading.

THE POEM THAT IS ALL FEELINGS: Poets can be inspired by their strong feelings about the world, their children, their significant others—this is ripe territory for finding a poem. However, sometimes the poem sits on the page and announces, *Hey, everyone, I have feelings.* Sometimes the poem tries to force an emotion on a reader, or it tries to convey more emotion than is possible given the poem's content. If a young poet wants to write a poem about the boy who broke her heart (the cad!), she should totally do that, but the poem can't be simply about her feelings. She can write a poem about grocery shopping at night, about something that happened at the bus stop, about going to a costume party in order to trigger an emotional experience for the reader—but if all she does is say, *hey, I have feelings*, the reader might end up not really caring.

THE POEM THAT IS OPEN FOR INTERPRETATION: Sometimes a writer might decide that the poem is going to mean whatever the reader wants it to mean. The poem is going to mean everything, which means it's really about nothing. Of course, a writer wants their poem to be accessible to as wide an audience as possible, but remember that universality is achieved through individuating away from that which is generic. A poem about kittens drowning in a lake will elicit more grief and sympathy than a poem that is about general grief and sympathy. Write about something singularly concrete and real, and the reader's interpretation part will follow.

THE POEM THAT WAS ONLY WRITTEN FOR ME: Writing is about communication, regardless of whether or not it's poetry. Sure, many people write poems for themselves and there is nothing wrong with that. But art doesn't happen in a vacuum—the power of art is in how it communicates to its audience, not in what it means to the creator. If all you want to do is write poems for yourself, then why take a poetry class? If nothing anyone says about your poems matters to you, then maybe think about why you want to write poems and what you think you want to communicate with those poems to your readers.

THE POEM THAT TRIES TO BE A "POEM": Sometimes a writer can't escape all those classes where they read Shelley and Byron and Wordsworth, and there is nothing wrong with liking those poets. But when a contemporary writer starts using archaic language to describe ancient ruins or feels like they have to start waxing up their flowery language to describe their pottery, they might be thinking more about what poems used to be centuries ago and less about what poetry is today in our present moment. It's okay to write a poem using your own conversational language, and it's okay to write about regular everyday things instead of objects you see in the museum.

THE POEM THAT RHYMES BECAUSE THE POET THINKS POEMS ARE SUPPOSED TO RHYME: Look, there's nothing inherently wrong with rhyme. Handled skillfully, it can add music to a poem; it can enhance meaning and emphasize sonic connections between otherwise unrelated words. It can move a poem forward or force pauses in certain place. However—and this is a big however—rhyme for its own sake can overwhelm a poem. It often leads to expected language choices or tortured syntax as the poet strains to get "above" at the end of the line below the one that ends with "love." Or maybe the poem becomes a game of expectation, as the audience is more interested in anticipating the rhyme than anything else. Contemporary American poetry has moved beyond end rhyme as its main musical driving force.

THE CHEESY POEM: We've all read these poems; we've all written these poems. Everyone was in seventh grade once. These are cheesy, schmaltzy poems that tackle big issues like love and sadness. They are super emotional and rely on cliché turns of phrase. They rhyme love with dove, soul with hole, trusted with busted. There might be a broken mirror or a sad song on the radio. There is emotion dripping from the page like a drop of blood sliding eternally down a shattered shard of glass. You get the idea.

THE GREETING CARD POEM: A greeting card is intended to appeal to as many people as possible—it's written in order to get people to buy it, and it does so by being deliberately vague, by emphasizing generic ideas and concepts over a particular narrative or image. A greeting card aims to say something broad about grief or love or a stay in the hospital that applies to as many situations as possible. A poem, in contrast, cannot be all things. A poem should not try to tell all love stories, or be appropriate for every funeral. While it's true that some poems have a kind of universal appeal, that universality comes (perhaps counterintuitively) from the poet's being as specific as possible; from focusing on the particular image instead of the big idea.

THE POEM WITH CENTERED LINES OR THE SEVENTEEN FONTS: How a poem looks on the page matters, and young poets should be encouraged to play with spacing and line breaks and line lengths. However, most contemporary poems do not feature centered lines, and merely clicking "center" on the word processor command bar is a poor substitute for thoughtful consideration of a poem's visual appearance. (Note that greeting cards typically feature centered lines, and we've already warned you about those.) Likewise, switching fonts willy-nilly rarely does much for a poem; rather than spending time debating between Garamond and Arial and Century Gothic, the young poet is well advised to spend time considering a poem's language.

THE "SHOCKING" POEM: It might seem transgressive to write a poem, say, from the point of view of a serial killer. All that blood and gore, right? And yet you're humanizing the killer! Like that television show *Dexter*, only it's a poem! But anytime you set out to shock your reader, you're limiting the poem before you even start. True shock is harder to achieve than you might expect, and sensationalized images of violence are merely another kind of cliché—just as sentimental in their own way as red roses and fluffy kittens.

THE POEM WHERE THE FIRST WORD OF EACH LINE IS CAPITALIZED BECAUSE AUTOCORRECT WANTED IT THAT WAY: Some poets do capitalize the first word of each line, and there's certainly a tradition of it in poetry written in English. However, most contemporary American poets eschew that first-word capitalization in favor of more sentence-driven capital letters. Capitalizing the first word of each line calls attention to these beginning words in ways you might not always want; it emphasizes each line as a new place of beginning. It slows the reader down ever so slightly and can make enjambed lines a little awkward to read. It lends a poem a sort of high formality, an old-fashioned look. None of this is to say don't do it, but if you do, do so because you've considered the effect it has and not because autocorrect did it without your input. (You can turn this particular feature off in your software, and you'll probably want to.) The best remedy for this is to learn to use your word-processing program so that decisions about how the poem appears on the page are made by you and not your software.

THE POEM THAT OBSCURES MORE THAN IT REVEALS: It often happens that when a young poet is introducing their poem before a workshop, they'll tell the story behind the poem—and the event that inspired the poem turns out to be far more engaging or moving than the poem itself. The natural question: Why didn't you just tell us that in the poem? The job of the poem is not to pull a mask made of metaphor and flowery language over the powerful moments of our

lives. Rather, the poem should seek to explore these events through language; sometimes that means complicating the story, but just as often it means clearly expressing the story so that the poem can build on that foundation (look, for instance at Jamaal May's "The Gun Joke" (253), which makes its narrative backbone perfectly clear, but is no less rich and complex for that).

THE POEM THAT IS UNAWARE OF ITS GAZE: Poems are often sparked by the relationship between the writer and the subject, and when there is distance or longing between them, the poem can sometimes get weird by objectifying its subject rather than finding empathy with it. The "male gaze," for example, is that perspective from a masculine point of view that sexually objectifies women by portraying them as creatures that exist for men to look at and use for their own pleasures. A poem grounded in the male gaze actually ends up dehumanizing its subject rather than elevating it or creating empathy like a poem should.

THE POEM THAT TEACHES YOU A LESSON: Sometimes a poem can try too hard to teach its readers a lesson about life. Racism is bad. Economically underprivileged people are people too. Adopting a dog from a shelter is more morally responsible than buying one from the pet store. The problem with the poem isn't the lesson itself—in fact, sometimes the particular lesson is a great topic for a poem. Usually, it's how the poem is privileging the need to teach the lesson over the writing of a poem, and the result is that both poem and lesson fail to land for the reader.

THE POEM THAT WANTS YOU TO BELIEVE: Sometimes a poem just wants to be about God. Or Allah. Or the Goddess. Faith and spirituality are, obviously, terrific subjects for a poem; there is a tradition of writing about holiness in poems. But sometimes a poem like this can get so caught up in advocating for a particular type of faith that it begins to feel preachy, more like a sidewalk sermon than a poem.

THE POEM THAT IS TOO AFRAID OF BEING ANY OF THE ABOVE POEMS: It's never a good idea to base your art around things not to do, but the above poems are the kinds of poems that often stand in the way of a young poet developing their skillsets. Still, sometimes a great poem is made because the writer had the courage to break some of the rules that were set in front of them and figure out a way to succeed despite the pitfalls. This is what art sometimes does—it pushes at the boundaries of what we think we should and shouldn't do. It takes clichéd or tired tropes and subverts them to create something new. It's not that a young poet should necessarily avoid writing these kinds of poems, but that a young poet should understand what they are getting themselves into when they tread on

hazardous or hackneyed ground so they can avoid writing a poem that feels like a mistake and craft a poem that feels like daring art.

Section IV

Contemporary Poetic Modes: An Anthology

Introduction

The following anthology of contemporary poems is arranged by poetic mode. There are 20 modes here, and each suggests a particular lens through which the poet views the world. Sometimes a poem is explicit about its mode—an ars poetica called "Ars Poetica" (170), a nocturne titled "Nocturne," (219–20, 221) self-portraits that declare themselves as such—but not always. In some cases, the mode is as much about the reader's perceptions of a poem as about anything the poets intended when they sat down to write.

We're borrowing the notion of poetic modes from composition studies. Dating as far back as the nineteenth century, writing students have been asked to operate in four modes: description, exposition, narration, and persuasion. Some may recognize these concepts from your own first-year college writing courses, but recently, most teachers have moved beyond the modes, dismissing them as reductive ways of thinking about writing and the boundaries between them as indistinct.

The same is true in poetry. As you read the poems in this anthology, you'll notice lots of overlap here and lots of grey area. It's unlikely, perhaps even impossible, for a poem to be operating precisely and solely in one particular mode. Thus, Jericho Brown's poem (194) is both found poem and elegy; Colette Arrand's poem (241) is portrait and apostrophe and perhaps even also a love poem. Layli Long Soldier's "38" (245–9) is both documentary and protest; Christina Olson's poem (218) is narrative and love poem at once. And so on. Part of what poems do is resist easy categorization. That's the slipperiness, the ambiguity we've been

calling for all along; it's what makes them poems.

Many traditional poetry anthologies categorize poems by form: sonnets, villanelles, free verse, and so forth. We think *this* is a reductive way of thinking about poems, in large part because it encourages focus on objective, countable, formal components such as meter and rhyme scheme. You know a poem is a sonnet if it consists of 14 lines of rhymed iambic pentameter. You know it's a Shakespearean sonnet if it follows the rhyme pattern of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG; it's a Petrarchan sonnet if it's ABBA ABBA CDE CDE. That's all true, and there's nothing wrong with looking at the formal elements of a poem. But it doesn't teach us very much about the work a poem does. It also doesn't teach us very much about what makes writing poems so challenging. Counting syllables and finding rhyme words is relatively an easy task; it's at least pretty straightforward and it's measurable, which makes it appealing to those working under a standardized-testing model of education. What's hard about learning to write poetry is learning how to use language to shape your reader's view of the world. That's also exactly what makes it worth doing.

When you read a poem that makes you feel, as Emily Dickinson wrote, "as if the top of [your] head were taken off," it's not because you're impressed by the rhyme scheme or because you noticed each line had exactly 10 syllables. Rather it's because something in the poem—its music, its voice, its view of the world—momentarily aligned with your own, or it *became* your own. You felt a connection with the poem, and with the poet, and often that connection manifests itself physically in our bodies: a tear, a twisting in the gut, an ache in the back of the throat. How the poem handled form is a component of how it creates that experience, of course, but it's far from the only component. So we have not privileged form here. Instead we've sorted these poems into groups by the lens through which they view the world, and each mode offers a way of thinking about that lens.

We offer these poems not as any kind of comprehensive survey of the state of contemporary poetry, but as a starting place. A poet's reading life must be vast and varied. Not every poem will connect with every reader, but we believe that each poem in this collection teaches something valuable about what a poem can be, what work it can do. So start here. Read and re-read these poems. When you find a poem you especially like, seek out more work by that poet. Seek out similar work by other poets. Find interviews with poets where they mention poets they like or are influenced by, and read the work of those poets. Read, read, read. In this manner, you will broaden and deepen your understanding of the complex connections between language and experience. Your own poems will be better for it.

Apostrophe

An apostrophe is a poem addressed to a particular entity, often a dead or absent person, but sometimes a personified object (Myles' mountains). The "you" in an apostrophe is presumed to be a particular reader (as opposed to the generic you that might be disguised first person or any given reader). There's a kind of intimacy in this mode, as the reader has the sensation of observing a personal communication from the poet to the addressee. Of course, it's a performed intimacy: the piece is, after all, a poem, not a letter or a private conversation.

To the Mountains

Eileen Myles

when I look out
at you
how absurd to think
of Diet Coke
killing me
I'm flying through
the air
and there you are
white and dangerous
who's kidding who

To Juan Doe #234

Eduardo C. Corral

I only recognized your hair: short,
neatly combed. Our mother

would've been proud.
In the Sonoran desert
your body became a slaughter-

house where faith and want were stunned,
hung upside down, gutted. We
were taught

to bring roses, to aim for the bush. Remember?
You tried to pork

a girl's armpit. In Border Patrol
jargon, the word

for border crossers is the same whether

they’re alive or dead.

When I read his flesh fell
off the bones, my stomach rumbled,

my mouth

watered. Yesterday, our mother said,
“My high heels are killing me.
Let’s go back to the funeral.”

You were always

her favorite. Slow cooking a roast
melts the tough tissue between the muscle fibers;
tender meat remains.

Remember the time
I caught you pissing
on a dog? You turned

away from me. In the small of your back
I thought I saw a face.
Split lip,

broken nose. It was a mask.
I yanked it from your flesh.
I wear it often.

Ars Poetica

An ars poetica is a poem that makes a statement about the nature of poetry. Of course, the same surely could be said of all poems: each poem is its own argument for what a poem is. But in the case of an ars poetica, this statement is explicitly part of the project of the piece. Sometimes that statement is clear, as in Collins’ poem here, and sometimes the poet approaches the subject more obliquely or metaphorically, as Brimhall does, though her title makes plain that her poem is in the ars poetica mode.

There is a long tradition of writing in this mode, dating back some 2000 years to Horace’s “Ars Poetica,” written around 19 BC, and most poets eventually try their hand at an ars poetica or two. It makes sense, as exploring the complex nature of poetry is one of the big questions on the mind of poets as they write.

Introduction to Poetry
Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Ars Poetica

Traci Brimhall

It happens as we set down one story
and take up another. We see it—the car,

the skid, the panic, the woman's body, a stain
on snow like blood in a dancer's shoe.

People bend over, afraid to touch her
in case she might rise, a bird startled to find

there wasn't more light on the other side
of the window. The body in so much pain

the soul can no longer keep it. This is how
it happens—something asleep in the earth awakens

and summons us. You feel fingers on your neck
and say, *Take me to the snow*, and it takes you.
* * *

Traci Brimhall on "Ars Poetica"

What was the spark for this poem?
I heard a car accident and rushed to the window. It was clear that people were already helping those who were injured. I felt both urgent and powerless at once, which is often how I feel when I sit down to write a poem.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
Brevity! I knew I wanted it to be as brief as an accident or inspiration, but I tend to want to keep transforming an image or adding metaphor after metaphor. Believing a short poem is enough was hard for me.

What was easy about writing this poem?
The imagery came pretty easily because it came from something I actually witnessed. After that first image the leaps came fairly quickly as well. Most of my images are usually things I imagine or invent.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
Hopefully the power of a title to give a poem tension or an additional level of meaning. I'm always interested in poems where the tension between the title and first line propels me forward.

What does this poem mean to you?
That art is often the result of accidents. In this case, a literal accident made me write, but so often a poem's magic comes from the collision of feelings and ideas and words. And you have to welcome those collisions in art, even if everything in you wants to avoid the risk.

Recognizing Lightning

Eugenia Leigh

When the school tornado alert
shriveled my little sister
hysterical in her snail position,
I marched to her third grade classroom
and thought, *This is it.*
Time to be brave. Thought the same
at age six, home alone
with both baby sisters, one hand
toweling my scalp spewing blood,
the other holding
the phone, calming our mother.
And here we were—
my sister and I—two adults
trekking thousands of miles east
and me, begging to switch seats.
Kansas torrents smeared
the highway blank. I steered
according to the GPS screen, aiming
my car, clogged with all our belongings,
for the neon green pixels.
If my sister hadn't mentioned
        Dorothy and her twister,
    I wouldn't have started bawling,
                You drive though the storm.
        Please—
We switched seats.
                My sister drove
and I phoned B, who made up
something about the Greeks
recognizing lightning as the source
of negative ions. Fertile soil
for art.
You're lucky, he said.

Write this down.

Aubade

An aubade is a dawn song, a poem of the morning. It traditionally captures the moment when two loves must part at dawn—which means that the poem might greet the rising of the day mournfully. There's a bittersweetness inherent in the mode.

Aubade with Bread for the Sparrows

Oliver de la Paz

The snow voids the distance of the road
and the first breath comes from the early morning
ghosts. The sparrows with their hard eyes
glisten in the difficult light. They preen
their feathers and chirp. It's as though they were one
voice talking to God.
Mornings are a sustained hymn
without the precision of faith. You've turned the bag
filled with molding bread inside out and watch
the old crusts fall to the ice. What's left
but to watch the daylight halved by the glistening ground?
What's left but an empty bag and the dust of bread
ravaged by songsters?
There are ruins we witness
within the moment of the world's first awakening
and the birds love you within that moment. They want
to eat the air and the stars they've hungered for, little razors.
Little urgent bells, the birds steal from each other's mouths
which makes you hurt. Don't ask for more bread.
The world is in haste to waken. Don't ask for a name
you can surrender, for there are more ghosts to placate.
Don't hurt for the sparrows, for they love you like a road.

Aubade

Major Jackson

After R.W.
You could be home boiling a pot
of tea as you sit on your terrace,
reading up on last night's soccer shot

beneath a scarf of cirrus.

You could be diving headlong
into the waves of Cocoa Beach
or teaching Mao Tse-tung
whose theories are easy to reach

or dropping off your dry cleaning,
making the New Americans wealthier,
or mowing your lawn, greening
up, but isn't this healthier?

Just imagine the hours you're
not squandering away,
or the antlike minutes frittered
with a tentative fiancé.

Your whole body agrees you'd
rather lie here like a snail
in my arm's crook, nude
and oblivious of all e-mails.

Yes, it's nearly one o'clock,
but we have more reasons
to kiss, to engage in small talk.
For one, these blissful seasons

are short, & tomorrow is never
insured, so bounce downstairs:
pour us glasses of whatever,
a tray of crackers, Bosc pears,

then let drop your sarong,
the wind high on your skin,
so we can test all day long
the notion of original sin.

Aubade Ending with the Death of a Mosquito

Tarfia Faizullah

—at Apollo Hospital, Dhaka

Let me break
free of these lace-frail
lilac fingers disrobing
the black sky

from the windows of this
room, I sit helpless, waiting,
silent—sister,
because you drew from me
the coil of red twine: loneliness—
spooled inside—
once, I wanted to say one
true thing, as in, I want more
in this life,
or, *the sky is hurt, a blue vessel*—
we pass through each other,
like weary
sweepers haunting through glass
doors, arcing across gray floors
faint trails
of dust we leave behind—he
touches my hand, waits for me
to clutch back
while mosquitoes rise like smoke
from this cold marble floor,
from altars,
seeking the blood still humming
in our unsaved bodies—he sighs,
I make a fist,
I kill this one leaving raw
kisses raised on our bare necks—
because I woke
alone in the myth of one life, I will
myself into another—how strange,
to witness
nameless, the tangled shape
our blood makes across us,
my open palm.

Documentary

Some poems try to document experiences, both those of the speaker and those of others. These experiences are often difficult ones as writers enter their poems not just to document, but in search of some kind of meaning. The poem tries to make sense of those experiences, although often there is no sense to be had and the

beauty of the poem comes through the journey toward meaning rather than the destination.

Rape Joke

Patricia Lockwood

The rape joke is that you were nineteen years old.

The rape joke is that he was your boyfriend.

The rape joke it wore a goatee. A goatee.

Imagine the rape joke looking in the mirror, perfectly reflecting back itself, and grooming itself to look more like a rape joke. "Ahhhh," it thinks. "Yes. A *goatee*."

No offense.

The rape joke is that he was seven years older. The rape joke is that you had known him for years, since you were too young to be interesting to him. You liked that use of the word *interesting*, as if you were a piece of knowledge that someone could be desperate to acquire, to assimilate, and to spit back out in different form through his goateed mouth.

Then suddenly you were older, but not very old at all.

The rape joke is that you had been drinking wine coolers. Wine coolers! Who drinks wine coolers? People who get raped, according to the rape joke.

The rape joke is he was a bouncer, and kept people out for a living.

Not you!

The rape joke is that he carried a knife, and would show it to you, and would turn it over and over in his hands as if it were a book.

He wasn't threatening you, you understood. He just really liked his knife.

The rape joke is he once almost murdered a dude by throwing him through a plate-glass window. The next day he told you and he was trembling, which you took as evidence of his sensitivity.

How can a piece of knowledge be stupid? But of course you were so stupid.

The rape joke is that sometimes he would tell you you were going on a date and then take you over to his best friend Peewee's house and make you watch wrestling while they all got high.

The rape joke is that his best friend was named Peewee.

OK, the rape joke is that he worshiped The Rock.

Like the dude was completely in love with The Rock. He thought it was so great what he could do with his eyebrow.

The rape joke is he called wrestling "a soap opera for men." Men love drama too, he assured you.

The rape joke is that his bookshelf was just a row of paperbacks about serial killers. You mistook

this for an interest in history, and laboring under this misapprehension you once gave him a copy of Günter Grass's *My Century*, which he never even tried to read.

It gets funnier.

The rape joke is that he kept a diary. I wonder if he wrote about the rape in it.

The rape joke is that you read it once, and he talked about another girl. He called her Miss Geography, and said "he didn't have those urges when he looked at her anymore," not since he met you. Close call, Miss Geography!

The rape joke is that he was your father's high-school student — your father taught World Religion. You helped him clean out his classroom at the end of the year, and he let you take home the most beat-up textbooks.

The rape joke is that he knew you when you were twelve years old. He once helped your family move two states over, and you drove from Cincinnati to St. Louis with him, all by yourselves, and he was kind to you, and you talked the whole way. He had chaw in his mouth the entire time, and you told him he was disgusting and he laughed, and spat the juice through his goatee into a Mountain Dew bottle.

The rape joke is that *come on*, you should have seen it coming. This rape joke is practically writing itself.

The rape joke is that you were facedown. The rape joke is you were wearing a pretty green necklace that your sister had made for you. Later you cut that necklace up. The mattress felt a specific way, and your mouth felt a specific way open against it, as if you were speaking, but you know you were not. As if your mouth were open ten years into the future, reciting a poem called Rape Joke.

The rape joke is that time is different, becomes more horrible and more habitable, and accommodates your need to go deeper into it.

Just like the body, which more than a concrete form is a capacity.

You know the body of time is *elastic*, can take almost anything you give it, and heals quickly.

The rape joke is that of course there was blood, which in human beings is so close to the surface.

The rape joke is you went home like nothing happened, and laughed about it the next

day and the day after that, and when you told people you laughed, and that was the rape joke.

It was a year before you told your parents, because he was like a son to them. The rape joke is that when you told your father, he made the sign of the cross over you and said, "I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," which even in its total wrongheadedness, was so completely sweet.

The rape joke is that you were crazy for the next five years, and had to move cities, and had to move states, and whole days went down into the sinkhole of thinking about why it happened. Like you went to look at your backyard and suddenly it wasn't there, and you were looking down into the center of the earth, which played the same red event perpetually.

The rape joke is that after a while you weren't crazy anymore, but close call, Miss Geography.

The rape joke is that for the next five years all you did was write, and never about yourself, about anything else, about apples on the tree, about islands, dead poets and the worms that aerated them, and there was no warm body in what you wrote, it was elsewhere.

The rape joke is that this is finally artless. The rape joke is that you do not write artlessly.

The rape joke is if you write a poem called Rape Joke, you're asking for it to become the only

thing people remember about you.

The rape joke is that you asked why he did it. The rape joke is he said he didn't know, like what else would a rape joke say? The rape joke said YOU were the one who was drunk, and the rape joke said you remembered it wrong, which made you laugh out loud for one long split-open second. The wine coolers weren't Bartles & Jaymes, but it would be funnier for the rape joke if they were. It was some pussy flavor, like Passionate Mango or Destroyed Strawberry, which you drank down without question and trustingly in the heart of Cincinnati Ohio.

Can rape jokes be funny at all, is the question.

Can any part of the rape joke be funny. The part where it ends — haha, just kidding! Though you did dream of killing the rape joke for years, spilling all of its blood out, and telling it that way.

The rape joke cries out for the right to be told.

The rape joke is that this is just how it happened.

The rape joke is that the next day he gave you *Pet Sounds*. No really. *Pet Sounds*. He said he was sorry and then he gave you *Pet Sounds*. Come on, that's a little bit funny.

Admit it.

Boy in Whale Bone Corset

Saeed Jones

The acre of grass is a sleeping
swarm of locusts and in the house
beside it, tears too are mistaken:
thin streams of kerosene
when night throws itself against
the wall, when Nina Simone sings
in the next room without her body
and I'm against the wall, bruised
but out of body: dream-headed
with my corset still on, stays
slightly less tight, bones against
bones, broken glass on the floor
like dance steps for a waltz
with no partner. Father in my room
looking for more *sissy clothes*
to burn. Something pink in his fist,
negligee, lace, fishnet, whore.
His son's a whore this last night
of Sodom. And the record skips
and skips and skips. Corset still on,
nothing else on, I'm at the window;
he's in the field, gasoline jug,
hand full of matches, night made
of locusts, column of smoke
mistaken for Old Testament God.

Split

Cathy Linh Che

I see my mother, at thirteen,
in a village so small
it's never given a name.

Monsoon season drying up—
steam lifting in full-bodied waves.
She chops bắ pchu oˆ´i for the hogs.

Her hair dips to the small of her back
as if dipped in black
and polished to a shine.

She wears a deep side-part
that splits her hair
into two uneven planes.

They come to watch her,
Americans, Marines, just boys,
eighteen or nineteen.

With scissor-fingers,
they snip the air,
point at their helmets

and then at her hair.
All they want is a small lock—
something for a bit of good luck.

Days later, my mother
is sent to the city
for safekeeping.

She will return home once,
only to be given away
to my father.

In the pictures,
the cake is sweet

and round.

My mother's hair
which spans the length
of her áo dài
is long, washed, and uncut.
* * *

Cathy Linh Che on "Split"

What was the spark for this poem?
My mother had told me this story hundreds of times when I was growing up. There were new details added and subtracted, but the core story was the same: that she had been separated from her mother because of the introduction of troops to her village in Vietnam. I felt the need to record this narrative, which was not available in any of the poetry or textbooks or media I'd read on the Vietnam War. I wanted to show the personal cost of political decisions made in Washington, and I wanted to write into the silence surrounding the topic.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
I think that because there was a story that I already knew I wanted to tell, it was a challenge to find the language for the story.

What was easy about writing this poem?
I think finding a topic that was important to me came easily.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
I wrote this poem when I was twenty, and I revised it over and over again through the years, and still, I don't think of it as done.

What does this poem mean to you?
"Split" represents to me why I write poetry in the first place. I write to define my place in the world.

Ekphrastic

Ekphrastic poems take as their subject matter another piece of art. But it's not just about picking a topic for the poem; the writer of an ekphrastic poem must both evoke and reframe the original work, must bring it to life for a reader who is unfamiliar with the inspiring piece and simultaneously recast or interpret the piece. It's not enough merely to describe a painting, say; the poet must also in the process of engaging with another work create a poem that stands both on its own and in dialogue with the original.

History Lesson

Natasha Trethewey

I am four in this photograph, standing
on a wide strip of Mississippi beach,
my hands on the flowered hips

of a bright bikini. My toes dig in,
curl around wet sand. The sun cuts
the rippling Gulf in flashes with each

tidal rush. Minnows dart at my feet
glinting like switchblades. I am alone
except for my grandmother, other side

of the camera, telling me how to pose.
It is 1970, two years after they opened
the rest of this beach to us,

forty years since the photograph
where she stood on a narrow plot
of sand marked *colored*, smiling,

her hands on the flowered hips
of a cotton meal-sack dress.

After Senza Titolo, 1964

Matthew Gavin Frank

painting by Corrado Cagli

I promised him I would not say
grasshopper, or superman. So

Fortune is this fish and this
flower, and neither are the body—

not some smart flat
of a knife. Not some

wondering about the stars.
The coming into the world

insectile, or some dumb gang
of coral, smacked with its first air—

I can't look at a fish without thinking
how lucky they are to have

the ocean. How can they watch
the stars? It's beautiful

what must be substitute,
their words for night,

the different way they
hold their fins.

How we come into
this thin tissue with a stroke

of fingertip over gill, the words
we have to explain, dumb

as the coral—wing to bird, fin
to fish, leaf to tree—is that

the best we can do?
Our heartbreak is last year's

nest, the frozen lake, the yard
we forgot to rake. The lie

is that we'll miss our families most.
Instead: the silver batteries

agitating the surface of the water,
the things we aren't—some wild

mating we can only read about,
all strange biology and our hearts

that are a part of it, kept from us,
something else we're not. We're

made up of servants
without a lord, working to push us

toward cold water and
it's beautiful, we're science

and there is no substitute
for the stars. Not mother

or husband or daughter, but fish,
but finch, but fir.
* * *

Matthew Gavin Frank on "After Senzo Titolo"

What was the spark for this poem?
The poem is part of a longer project, which examines the intersection between the artistic works of Italian-Jewish artists, and a lyrical engagement of my own ancestral history. I guess I began with the attempt—however holy or futile—to find some sort of beautiful container, or pastel-colored context (begotten of tragedy) into which I could wedge elements of my family's experiences with oppression, allowing said experiences to converse with that larger context to see, in part, what they were made of.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
Finding a way to be both respectful and, well, enchanting, while braiding

in elements of familial oral history, and Corrado Cagli's desperate and lovely painterly obsessions; and freeing myself to riff on what I (perhaps mistakenly) perceived those obsessions to be.

What was easy about writing this poem?
Indulging my infatuation with fish and bugs.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
That it took research. That all of the poems that pertain to this project are in conversation, however indirectly or implicitly, with my long-ago visit to Il Museo Ebraico di Bologna (The Jewish Museum of Bologna) and the museum's numerous exhibits and manuscripts on rabbinical writings, mysticism, and cabala, and the effects of anti-Semitism on Jewish art. I also attended a temporary exhibition of the paintings of Azra Somekh Coen. Coen's paintings deal in cultural duality and mutualism, oftentimes manifesting on the canvas as dark versus light, good versus bad, sky versus earth (if not fish vs. insect, fish vs. bird, fish vs. tree), in an artistic exploration of Jewish conscience and values.

What does this poem mean to you?
Quite possibly, the same thing it means to you.

1935

Naomi Shihab Nye

You're 8 in the photograph,
standing behind a table of men
dipping bread in hummus.
Men on small stools
with variant headdresses,
men so absorbed in their meal
they don't see anything but food,
rough wooden table,
tiny plates,
fresh mound of bread
ripped into soft triangles.

I wish I had found this picture
while you were still alive.
Did they give you the last bite?
You beam as if you owned the whole city,
could go anywhere in Jerusalem,
watch over eating with affection,
waiting your turn.

My new friend had this picture
on her wall. You spoke inside
my head the moment before I saw it.
Now the picture hangs
beside my desk, holding
layered lost worlds where
you are, not only the person I knew
but the person before the person I knew,
in your universe, your life's possible story,
still smiling.

Quinta Del Sordo

Monica Youn

Saturn Devouring His Son (Francisco Goya, 1819-1823)

how can I
ask you to

absolve me
my fingers

still greasy
with envy

gaudy oils
still smearing

the dim walls
the quiet

chamber of
my mouth

Elegy

An elegy is a lamentation. A meditation on grief. An exploration of mourning. The word elegy derives from the Greek *elegos*, meaning “mournful song.” The word used to refer to a particular form of poetry, but contemporary elegies vary widely in form, and the mode primarily means poems exploring loss or death. Matthew Olzmann says, “The job of the elegy isn’t to simply ‘announce’ grief, but to make it palpable so that we can comprehend its depth and magnitude,” and elegies are often structured to mimic the process of grieving, where the poet moves from a stunned sense of loss to a new way of seeing the world.

Elegy with lies

Bob Hicok

This lost person I loved. Loved for a hundred years.
When I find her. Find her in a forest. In a cabin
under smoke and clouds shaped like smoke. When I find her
and call her name (nothing) and knock (nothing)
and build a machine that believes it's God and the machine
calls her name (nothing) and knocks (nothing).
When I tear the machine down and she runs from the cabin
pointing a gun at my memories and telling me
to leave, stranger, leave, man of hammers.
When I can't finish that story. When I get to the gun
pointed at my head. When I want it to go off.
When everything I say to anyone all day long
is bang. That would be today. When I can't use her name.
All day long. Soft as cotton, tender as kiss. Bang.

The Role of Elegy

Mary Jo Bang

The role of elegy is
To put a death mask on tragedy,
A drape on the mirror.
To bow to the cultural

Debate over the aesthetization of sorrow,
Of loss, of the unbearable
Afterimage of the once material.
To look for an imagined

Consolidation of grief
So we can all be finished
Once and for all and genuinely shut up
The cabinet of genuine particulars.

Instead there's the endless refrain
One hears replayed repeatedly
Through the just ajar door:
Some terrible mistake has been made.

What is elegy but the attempt
To rebreathe life
Into what the gone one once was
Before he grew to enormity.

Come on stage and be yourself,
The elegist says to the dead. Show them
Now—after the fact—
What you were meant to be:

The performer of a live song.
A shoe. Now bow.
What is left but this:
The compulsion to tell.

The transient distraction of ink on cloth
One scrubbed and scrubbed

But couldn't make less.
Not then, not soon.

Each day, a new caption on the cartoon
Ending that simply cannot be.
One hears repeatedly, the role of elegy is.

No More Cake Here

Natalie Diaz

When my brother died
I worried there wasn't enough time
to deliver the one hundred invitations
I'd scribbled while on the phone with the mortuary:
Because of the short notice no need to rsvp.
Unfortunately the firemen couldn't come.
(I had hoped they'd give free rides on the truck.)
They did agree to drive by the house once
with the lights on— It was a party after all.

I put Mom and Dad in charge of balloons,
let them blow as many years of my brother's name,
jails, twenty-dollar bills, midnight phone calls,
fistfights, and ER visits as they could let go of.
The scarlet balloons zigzagged along the ceiling
like they'd been filled with helium. Mom blew up
so many that she fell asleep. She slept for ten years—
she missed the whole party.

My brothers and sisters were giddy, shredding
his stained T-shirts and raggedy pants, t hrowing them up
into the air like confetti.

When the clowns came in a few balloons slipped out
the front door. They seemed to know where
they were going and shrank to a fistful of red grins
at the end of our cul-de-sac. The clowns played toy bugles
until the air was scented with rotten raspberries.
They pulled scarves from Mom's ear—she slept through it.
I baked my brother's favorite cake (chocolate, white frosting).
When I counted there were ninety-nine of us in the kitchen.
We all stuck our fingers in the mixing bowl.

A few stray dogs came to the window.

I heard their stomachs and mouths growling
over the mariachi band playing in the bathroom.
(There was no room in the hallway because of the magician.)
The mariachis complained about the bathtub acoustics.
I told the dogs, *No more cake here*, and shut the window.
The fire truck came by with the sirens on. The dogs ran away.
I sliced the cake into ninety-nine pieces.

I wrapped all the electronic equipment in the house,
taped pink bows and glittery ribbons to them—
remote controls, the Polaroid, stereo, Shop-Vac,
even the motor to Dad's work truck—everything
my brother had taken apart and put back together
doing his crystal meth tricks—he'd always been
a magician of sorts.

Two mutants came to the door.
One looked almost human. They wanted
to know if my brother had willed them the pots
and pans and spoons stacked in his basement bedroom.
They said they missed my brother's cooking and did we
have any cake. *No more cake here*, I told them.
Well, what's in the piñata? they asked. I told them
God was and they ran into the desert, barefoot.
I gave Dad his slice and put Mom's in the freezer.
I brought up the pots and pans and spoons
(really, my brother was a horrible cook), banged them
together like a New Year's Day celebration.

My brother finally showed up asking why
he hadn't been invited and who baked the cake.
He told me I shouldn't smile, that this whole party was shit
because I'd imagined it all. The worst part he said was
he was still alive. The worst part he said was
he wasn't even dead. I think he's right, but maybe
the worst part is that I'm still imagining the party, maybe
the worst part is that I can still taste the cake.

Found Poems

A found poem is a poem in which the words are not written by the poet but, quite literally, found—and then arranged somehow into a poem. The poet's task here is to recast the language, to make art from that which originally might have not have been intended as artful.

One-Star Reviews of the Great Wall of China

Aimee Nezhukumatathil

(a found poem)

This is not an experience of a lifetime.
It was awful. I couldn't enjoy
the scenery because I was too busy
trying not to trample
or be trampled. Besides that,
it was great. Ha ha, just kidding:

I hated it.

The crowds are crazy!
The pollution is crazy!
No one can speak English!

Back in my day the walls were more beautiful and they didn't have to be so tall. I didn't feel good with my leg that day, and my wife really wanted to visit all the Chinese Wall and I said "Ok, let's do it!" but I soon understood that it was definitely too long for me and I got tired. I failed in front of my wife because of this wall, so I'm not going back.

It was raining.
It was foggy.
It was raining.

Too much fog.
Too much rain.

It's a wall.

Found: Messiah

Jericho Brown

blog entry at The Dumb, the Bad, and the Dead

A Shreveport man was killed
When he tried to rob two men.

Decided he could make money

Easier stealing it.
Police responding to

Gunshots found Messiah

Demery, 27, shot once in the chest
Trying to rob Rodrigus

And Shamicheal. Rodrigus got

A gun, but police found
Some marijuana, so he’s going to jail

Too. This story would have been nicer

With some innocent people involved,
But one less goblin is one

Less goblin is one less.

How-To

If all poems offer us instructions for seeing the world, how-to poems do so explicitly, offering or claiming to offer directions for completing a certain task. The mode places the reader in the role of actor, doer, follower of instructions; these poems are often written in the imperative mood, with the verbs directing the reader around the landscape of the poem: stage directions for exploring the world of the poem.

How to Create an Agnostic

Sherman Alexie

Singing with my son,

I clapped my hands
Just as lightning struck.

It was dumb luck.

But my son, awed, thought
I'd created the electricity.

He asked, "Dad, how'd you do that?"

Before I could answer,
thunder shook the house

And set off neighborhood car alarms.

"Dad," he said. "Can you burn
down that tree outside my window?

The one that looks like a giant owl?"

O, my little disciple, my one boy choir,
I can't do that

because your father,
your half-assed messiah,

is afraid of fire.

How to Locate Water on a Desert Island

Karen Skolfield

Darling, these are the palm trees
we've endlessly discussed, their closeness
to dinosaurs and leather. Plants produce
spores and send their children in the air.
It's the wrong time to think
of all the houseplants I've neglected, but still.
That night the praying mantis case
hatched in the kitchen: insects so small
and perfect that for a moment we believed
in their prayer. Of course sticks
can walk and the roots of trees gather
forgotten rains. Even science
can't make up its mind about the divining
rod trembling in the old man's hand:
is it the fork or is it his body
endlessly seeking its source? Here shade
has a brand new meaning. An art form
and our bodies bend to fit in the shapes
laid out for us. Rest for a moment my love,
my comma in the dark. The air around us
explodes in plumage. Watch where the birds go.

* * *

Karen Skolfield on "How to Locate Water on a Desert Island"

What was the spark for this poem?

I was obsessed with *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*—not so much because the book offers practical advice (it doesn't), but because the advice—on fending off alligators, escaping from the trunk of a car, surviving quicksand, etc.—plays into our irrational, dark-dream fears. That said, if I am ever trying to outrun killer bees or if my parachute (why am I wearing a parachute?) won't open, I'll know what

to do.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
Moving from image to image is hard, and I was grateful when the praying mantises showed up to get me from the house/houseplants to water dowsing.

What was easy about writing this poem?
I love pulling together odd things—insects, weird plant reproduction, science and folklore. It was fun to write, which of course makes it feel easier. Bonus: I got to publicly admit my killing ways with houseplants, and not long after I wrote this I found a forever home for my poor, gasping philodendron.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
That, no joke, you really shouldn't leave praying mantis cases in your house. Imagine tiny grains of rice crawling all over your stuff—half icky, half cool, but you are responsible for gathering them up and putting them outdoors.

What does this poem mean to you?
Ultimately, I think this is a love poem. The central image of the praying mantis case came from when my now-husband and I started dating and everything felt fresh and miraculous, and I loved having the speaker of the poem, whom I see as a woman, being the survivor and thinker in the face of disaster. But there's also trepidation—that speaker mentions offspring and worries about the future and surviving in a strange landscape.

Lighter

Dorianne Laux

> *Aim above morality.*
> *–Ruth Gordon,* Harold and Maude

Steal something worthless, something small,
every once in awhile. A lighter from the counter
at the 7-Eleven. Hold that darkness in your hand.
Look straight into the eyes of the clerk
as you slip it in your pocket, her blue
bruised eyes. Don't justify it. Just take
your change, your cigarettes, and walk
out the door into the snow or hard rain,
sunlight bearing down, like a truck, on your back.
Call it luck when you don't get caught.
Breathe easy as you stand on the corner,
waiting, like everyone else, for the light to change,
following the cop car with your eyes
as it slowly rolls by, ignoring the baby
in its shaded stroller. Don't you want
something for nothing? Haven't you suffered?
Haven't you been beaten down, condemned
like a tenement, gone to bed hungry, alone?
Sit on a stone bench and dig deep for it,
touch your thumb to the greased metal wheel.
Call it a gift from the gods of fire.
Call it your due.

List Poems

A list poem is just what it sounds like: a list. It's a way of presenting information or im ages or metaphors that removes the need for connecting language: conjunctions, sentence structure, etc. It asks the reader to do the work of finding the connections between the listed items. The logic of a list is often implicit, not explicit. The title becomes particularly important in this mode, as it often establishes a key frame for understanding the list that follows.

alternate names for black boys
Danez Smith

1. smoke above the burning bush
2. archnemesis of summer night
3. first son of soil
4. coal awaiting spark & wind
5. guilty until proven dead
6. oil heavy starlight
7. monster until proven ghost
8. gone
9. boy
10. phoenix who forgets to un-ash
11. gods of shovels & black veils
12. what once passed for kindling
13. fireworks at dawn
14. brilliant, shadow colored coral
15. (I thought to leave this blank
but who am I to name us nothing?)
16. prayer who learned to bite & sprint
17. a mother's joy & clutched breath

Things That Didn’t Work

Catie Rosemurgy

Touching, seriousness, snow.
The short list of lovers anyone has ever had, both of whom
have turned into long, quiet rivers.

Geraniums and their bruises that ruin
the clean edges of summer. The mother wiping
her son’s cheek with spit.

Picture frames. Targets. The psychological
boundaries described in books.
Any shape or line whatsoever.

Inventory Elegy 3: The Dirty Entry

Ander Monson

• Polaroid of you undressed
• pervasive nail polish scent
• impact auto safety glass
• your lack of balance
• evidence of cloth and hearing
• persuasion
• salt-lick neck hair
• ropes and cordage, debris on
• flame-lick stop sign light
• your first Halloween without dry ice witch punch
• cake meant for you to pick up: bundt
• eyeglass frame: rubber, wire
• repeated calls for you at home; my anger

Love Poems

On the one hand, a love poem is a classification of a type of poem written by one person for another. There are many love poems in the world, many of them one dimensional because they are steeped more in sentiment than in poetry, more in profession of love than conveying the emotional experience to the reader.

When a writer sits down to write in the mode of the love poem, however, something different is at work—a lot more than professing fondness for someone. As a mode, the love poem makes desire physical, the emotion made real so that the reader can experience this particular sensation of love too. So, yes, writing a love poem is in part about simply choosing a topic, yet because so many love poems have been written, and it's so easy for them to become sentimental and cliché, the choice to write a love poem forces the poet into a particular mode of thinking.

The Bus Ride

Jenny Johnson

When she turns from the window and sees me
she is as lovely as a thrush seeing for the first time all sides of the sky.

Let this be a ballet without intermission: the grace of this ride beside her
on the green vinyl, soft thunderclaps in the quarry.

Let me be her afternoon jay,
hot silo, red shale crumbling—

Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem

Matthew Olzmann

Here's what I've got, the reasons why our marriage
might work: Because you wear pink but write poems
about bullets and gravestones. Because you yell
at your keys when you lose them, and laugh,
loudly, at your own jokes. Because you can hold a pistol,
gut a pig. Because you memorize songs, even commercials
from thirty years back and sing them when vacuuming.
You have soft hands. Because when we moved, the contents
of what you packed were written *inside* the boxes.
Because you think swans are overrated.
Because you drove me to the train station. You drove me
to Minneapolis. You drove me to Providence.
Because you underline everything you read, and circle
the things you think are important, and put stars next
to the things you think I should think are important,
and write notes in the margins about all the people
you're mad at and my name almost never appears there.
Because you make that pork recipe you found
in the Frida Kahlo Cookbook. Because when you read
that essay about Rilke, you underlined the whole thing
except the part where Rilke says love means to deny the self
and to be consumed in flames. Because when the lights
are off, the curtains drawn, and an additional sheet is nailed
over the window s, you still believe someone outside
can see you. And one day five summers ago,
when you couldn't put gas in your car, when your fridge
was so empty—not even leftovers or condiments—
there was a single twenty-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew,
which you paid for with your last damn dime
because you once overheard me say that I liked it.

You Don’t Know What Love Is

Kim Addonizio

You don't know what love is
but you know how to raise it in me
like a dead girl winched up from a river. How to
wash off the sludge, the stench of our past.
How to start clean. This love even sits up
and blinks; amazed, she takes a few shaky steps.
Any day now she'll try to eat solid food. She'll want
to get into a fast car, one low to the ground, and drive
to some cinderblock shithole in the desert
where she can drink and get sick and then
dance in nothing but her underwear. You know
where she's headed, you know she'll wake up
with an ache she can't locate and no money
and a terrible thirst. So to hell
with your warm hands sliding inside my shirt
and your tongue down my throat
like an oxygen tube. Cover me
in black plastic. Let the mourners through.

Lyric

We're not referring here to words meant be set to music, as in song lyrics, although that is the original sense of the phrase: lyric poems. Traditionally, the lyric poem is a short, intense, composition that expresses deep personal feelings. For contemporary poets, working in the lyric mode means writing a poem that is driven not necessarily by narrative or storytelling, but by some other impulse: intensity of emotion or image or sound. Associations may be more idiosyncratic or personal; the story being told may be more obscured by the language. Lyric poems are often the ones that evoke an initial "Huh? I don't get it" upon first read. Even more than any other mode, lyric poems ask the reader to sit and reflect, to read slowly, to let go of expected associations or narrative linearity. The challenge for the writer is that if you ask this of your readers, you have to make the poem worth the effort.

I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl

Karyna McGlynn

It's no wonder
I'm always tired
with all these tract houses—

It's night & cold
on my belly in
the undeveloped field now

I have to bury her
clothing inside
a black garbage bag in plot D

police cars roll
past but continue
down the treeless parkway

even after shining
their lights on
me in my freshman sundress

I can only assume
they don't see
the significance of my presence

but I must say
1994 is a simpler
time—not everyone is suspect

I crawl up next to

my old house & look through a lit window

my mother reads

a book in bed Iwant to knock on the glass, there’s something

I need to tell her

Tell Me Again About the Last Time You Saw Her

Gary L. McDowell

The telephone on the moon has been ringing
continuously

since 1969 The footprints
ache to answer it

See red Mars
rise

Driving becomes difficult with only the road
in your way What shatters on it

but light, each moon claiming the other false

The best kind of torture
is the voluntary kind

Ghosts revered for their sense of smell:

fingerling potatoes roasted in olive oil
and sea salt

And on the couch Paranoia
curled-up in the shape

of a child’s skeleton

Recovery

Kaveh Akbar

First, setting down the glass.

Then the knives.

Black resin seeps

into the carpet.

According to science,

I should be dead.

Lyptus table, unsteady

boat, drifts away.

Angostura, agave,

elderflower, rye—

the whole paradisal

bouquet spins apart.

Here, I am graceless.

No. Worse than that.

* * *

Kaveh Akbar on "Recovery"

What was the spark for this poem?

My life was changing rapidly and suddenly I was becoming a totally new person, having to relearn how to be a human being. Poetry has always been a site of meaning-making for me, a place where I go to figure out how I feel about things. So as my life was changing, I was writing more and more, trying to figure out who I would become, what everything meant. This poem came from that process.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
I think this is an instance of a poem where the most difficult part was just the lived experience that precipitated it. The life transition the poem speaks to was the most difficult thing I've ever done—moving that sort of difficulty in to a generative, creative space like a poem is a highly volatile process.

What was easy about writing this poem?
I remember the specific language of this poem coming to me quite quickly. There was quite a bit of revision involved and I didn't send the poem out for publication until probably two or so years after I wrote the first draft. In that time, it went through many different bodies and lengths, but the core nucleus of images, the final rhetorical gesture, have been there since the very first draft.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
When you're sad, you listen to sad music, right? This isn't because you're masochistic, wanting to deepen your misery. It's because you want to commiserate, hear that other people have also lived through intense personal suffering and lived to tell (and even create, sing!) about it. I think that's the great ambition of this poem—that its account of a trying time might one day be useful to another person experiencing something similar.

What does this poem mean to you?
My life now is much better than it was when I was writing this poem. My psychic life is much healthier and I know a lot more about living life in a healthy way. So, for me, this poem is sort of a portal into the life of a person I used to be, a doorway into a kind of consciousness I'm no longer able to access directly.

Meditations

The meditative mode begins in contemplation, in deep rumination about an idea, an experience, an event—about anything, really. The speaker thinks and reflects and moves the reader through a poem driven by the process of thought, and the poems are often explicit about contemplation.

Good Bones

Maggie Smith

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.
Life is short, and I've shortened mine
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
I'll keep from my children. The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.
* * *

Maggie Smith on "Good Bones"

What was the spark for this poem?
When I wrote "Good Bones," I'd been thinking a lot about how—if, honestly—to tell my kids about the darker parts of the world. They were two and six at the time, too young to watch the news or learn about

current events in school. But I wondered what I'd tell them. This poem is a thinking-through of that.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
The thinking behind the poem was the most difficult part, and by that I mean painful and conflicted. I'm still not sure how to "sell the world" to my kids. I'm as honest with them as I can be, given their ages, but I also want them to be hopeful.

What was easy about writing this poem?
Composing this poem was surprisingly easy. I say surprisingly because most of my poems go through multiple revisions. I tend not to trust poems that come too easily. But I wrote "Good Bones" in one sitting, maybe thirty minutes or so, in a Starbucks one night. I revised one sentence, if I remember correctly, to word it slightly differently, and that was it.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
I think it might be helpful for a young writer to know that repetition can be a useful way to drill down into a poem's center. If a line or phrase comes to you—"life is short, though I keep this from my children," for example—don't be afraid to use it as a refrain of sorts as you draft. It may be that the repetition survives the revision stage and earns a place in the finished poem, as it did in "Good Bones." Or it may be that the repetition is a tool that helps you access language and ideas you wouldn't have accessed otherwise, but perhaps it gets cut somewhere along the line. Either way, it served its purpose.

What does this poem mean to you?
This poem is very personal. It's about my desire as a parent to balance realism and optimism. It's about having hope that future generations—my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren—will make the world a better place.

Downhearted

Ada Limón

Six horses died in a tractor-trailer fire.
There. That's the hard part. I wanted
to tell you straight away so we could
grieve together. So many sad things,
that's just one on a long recent list
that loops and elongates in the chest,
in the diaphragm, in the alveoli. What
is it they say, heart-sick or downhearted?
I picture a heart lying down on the floor
of the torso, pulling up the blankets
over its head, thinking this pain will
go on forever (even though it won't).
The heart is watching Lifetime movies
and wishing, and missing all the good
parts of her that she has forgotten.
The heart is so tired of beating
herself up, she wants to stop it still,
but also she wants the blood to return,
wants to bring in the thrill and wind of the ride,
the fast pull of life driving underneath her.
What the heart wants? The heart wants
her horses back.

Song

Tracy K. Smith

I think of your hands all those years ago
Learning to maneuver a pencil, or struggling
To fasten a coat. The hands you'd sit on in class,
The nails you chewed absently. The clumsy authority
With which they'd sail to the air when they knew
You knew the answer. I think of them lying empty
At night, of the fingers wrangling something
From your nose, or buried in the cave of your ear.
All the things they did cautiously, pointedly,
Obedient to the suddenest whim. Their shames.
How they failed. What they won't forget year after year.
Or now. Resting on the wheel or the edge of your knee.
I am trying to decide what they feel when they wake up
And discover my body is near. Before touch.
Pushing off the ledge of the easy quiet dancing between us.

Jet

Tony Hoagland

Sometimes I wish I were still out
on the back porch, drinking jet fuel
with the boys, getting louder and louder
as the empty cans drop out of our paws
like booster rockets falling back to Earth

and we soar up into the summer stars.
Summer. The big sky river rushes overhead,
bearing asteroids and mist, blind fish
and old space suits with skeletons inside.
On Earth, men celebrate their hairiness,

and it is good, a way of letting life
out of the box, uncapping the bottle
to let the effervescence gush
through the narrow, usually constricted neck.

And now the crickets plug in their appliances
in unison, and then the fireflies flash
dots and dashes in the grass, like punctuation
for the labyrinthine, untrue tales of sex
someone is telling in the dark, though

no one really hears. We gaze into the night
as if remembering the bright unbroken planet
we once came from,
to which we will never
be permitted to return.
We are amazed how hurt we are.
We would give anything for what we have.

Narrative

While narrative is an element of many poems, this mode refers to poems driven primarily by the storytelling impulse and relying largely on the narrative arc to provide the poem with a structure. They start with a problem or catalyst and proceed from there, though they are still poems after all, and how the story proceeds might not always be a straight line toward a particular climax.

Teacher of the Year

David Kirby

This year last year's Teacher of the Year
broke an office window having sex with a student
at Laurie's university, Laurie tells me,
and I say, "Ummmm … broke it with what?"
and she says that's what everybody wants to know,
like, the head? The booty? The consensus is

it was a foot bobbing UP and down and UP
and down and then lashing out in a final ecstatic
spasm, crash! Then comes surprise, giggles,
shushing noises. Somebody finds out,
though. Somebody always finds out:
my first Mardi Gras, when I was ten,
I remember passing a man saying,
"Oh, come on, baby, why can't we let BY-gones
be BY-gones?" and shaking his cupped hands
as though he is comparison-shopping
for coconuts while peering pleadingly
into the pinched face of his female companion,

whose own arms are folded tightly across her chest,
and even then I thought, Hmmm! Bet I know
what those bygones are! I.e., that they have
nothing to do with who ate that last piece of cake
or brought the car home with the gas tank empty
and everything to do with sex stuff.

Laurie is in town with Jack, who is a therapy dog,
and she tells me she takes Jack to homes
and nursing centers to cheer up old-timers,
and after their first visit, she asked
the activities coordinator if she should do
anything differently, and the woman says,

"Could you dress him up?" And Laurie says,
"Excuse me?" and the woman says,
"They really like it when the dogs wear clothes."
My analysis: having seen people act like dogs
all their lives, toward the end, elderly people
find it amusing when dogs act like people.

A German shepherd could be Zorro, for example,
and a chow Elivus as a matador. A poodle could be
St. Teresa of Avila, a border collie Sinatra.
A yorkie could be a morris dancer
and a sheltie a gandy dancer or vice versa.
A schnauzer could be Jayne Mansfield.

Dogs could pair up: imagine a boxer
as Inspector Javert chasing a bassett hound
as Jean Valjean under the beds, around
the potted plants, in and out of the cafeteria.
Or a bichon frise as Alexander Hamilton fighting
a duel with a Boston terrier as Aaron Burr.

On the romantic side, there could be
a golden lab and a chocolate lab
as Romeo and Juliet or a Samoyed and a husky
as Tristan and Isolde, though it wouldn't been good
to let their love end the way doggie love does:
the posture isn't nice, and the facial expressions

are not the kind of think you want to think about
when you're thinking about this kind of thing.
Up to a point, you want to know it all,
then the more you know, the less you want to know.
Though you can't help wondering:
a shoulder? An elbow? A knee?

Dynamite

Anders Carlson-Wee

My brother hits me hard with a stick
so I whip a choke-chain

across his face. We're playing
a game called *Dynamite*

where everything you throw
is a stick of dynamite,

unless it's pine. Pine sticks
are rifles and pinecones are grenades,

but everything else is dynamite.
I run down the driveway

and back behind the garage
where we keep the leopard frogs

in buckets of water
with logs and rock islands.

When he comes around the corner
the blood is pouring

out of his nose and down his neck
and he has a hammer in his hand.

I pick up his favorite frog
and say If you come any closer

I'll squeeze. He tells me I won't.
He starts coming closer.

I say a hammer isn't dynamite.
He reminds me that everything is dynamite.

* * *

Anders Carlson-Wee on "Dynamite"

What was the spark for this poem?
I wanted to capture the craziness of this game my brother and I used to play when we were little kids. The rapid speed of the narrative mimics the violence and survivalist mentality of the game, while the matter-of-fact explanation of the game's rules (lines 3-7) stalls the action and cuts against the game's spiral into chaos.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
Figuring out how to tell the story as quickly as possible. Also, striking the right balance between action and "rules"—or, to put it another way: the right balance between chaos and attempts to control chaos.

What was easy about writing this poem?
Nothing was easy. However, the rules in the poem are real rules from the game, and when I wrote them down, their matter-of-factness comforted me (as a writer) in the same way they act as a comfort—however poorly—in the poem.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
Every word was painstakingly chosen, in hopes of creating a poem that not only tells a story, but also enacts the story through music, rhythm, and pacing. For example, near the end of the poem (lines 21 and 22), I used short sentences to slow down the pacing, which heightens the drama at the moment of climax—right when you want the poem to go the fastest (to find out what happens at the end!), it goes the slowest.

What does this poem mean to you?
A poem doesn't mean one thing—it means wildly different things depending on who's reading it, and at what stage in their life, and in what context. Poems are imaginative spaces and we can use them any way we want. That's one of the great gifts of poetry: It's not set in stone; rather, it's interactive and sensitive to suggestion. Poetry is here to help us live our lives. A poem becomes what we need it to be in any given moment, and that flexibility is perhaps its most awesome power.

In Which Christina Imagines That Different Types of Alcohol Are Men and She Is Seeing Them All

Christina Olson

Gin was nice enough but had tiny teeth: little ships
of white. Whiskey showed up an hour late,
took me and my one good dress

to a crab shack. We cracked boiled crawfish, swept
our fingers over the tablecloth, left butter behind.

I hid in the back of the coffee shop—crouched
behind whole beans—and scoped out Rum, then left
without introducing myself. Maybe it's cruel of me

but I just wasn't feeling exotic. Bourbon
and I had fun, but it was all cigarettes

and ex-wives. Tequila was ever the gentleman, blond
and smooth as caramel. Bought all my rounds
and when I came back from the bathroom he,

my wallet, my car: all gone. The bartender didn't look
sorry. My mother set me up with Brandy

and I should have known that he'd be the type
to own small dogs. I don't like poodles.
I saw Gin again last night; both of us out

with other people. His: a redhead. I waved anyway,
and when he smiled, all sharp points

and bloodied gums, well, *that* was when I fell in love.

Nocturne

A nocturne is a night song, a night scene, a night prayer. It's a poem of sleeplessness, frequently associated with spiritual contemplation.

Nocturne

Kiki Petrosino

Last night, the one I loved
before you went before me, walking
with his bride.

I followed with my broken
feet & coat unlatched. He called
her *cake* & *coin* & *wing*

& told her of a place so high
the pines grow small
as thumbs.

They went talking into
the trees the wedding trees
the trees only I

felt the earth a dark
cut on my gums I held
my teeth in such cloud

of grit. *Hosanna*.
Then came I to the brink
of this tower room

where I have watched
the corsair ships, their iron dazzle
like a field of ghosts.

You must never sail from me
into the blind seep of that
blue mist.

I mean to tell you *no*
in my language, slow
with blood

no from my cakewhite
belly I sat *The night*
is a knife of salt & every star

sleeps on a bed of smoke

yet still you go from me, more gone
than glass, your skin

an acre of tallgrass speeding
behind the window
& the halves of my head

make a hoofbeat
a thing not born, but flooded
with sound—

It's true, it is true

No music
in the world except
what I jaw

& my jaws are black
and fearsome mine.

Nocturne

Li-Young Lee

That scraping of iron on iron when the wind
rises, what is it? Something the wind won't
quit with, but drags back and forth.
Sometimes faint, far, then suddenly, close, just
beyond the screened door, as if someone there
squats in the dark honing his wares against
my threshold. Half steel wire, half metal wing,
nothing and anything might make this noise
of saws and rasps, a creaking and groaning
of bone-growth, or body-death, marriages of rust,
or ore abraded. Tonight, something bows
that should not bend. Something stiffens that should
slide. Something, loose and not right,
rakes or forges itself all night.

Occasional

An occasional poem is one written to commemorate a particular event. The mode is traditionally associated with public events and poems delivered orally, as Blanco's poem for President Obama's second inauguration in January 2013. But of course the occasion being marked can be much more personal or intimate, as it is in poems by Moon and Joseph. Or it can be a blend, as in Beasley's poem, which commemorates both a public holiday and an intimate family moment.

One Today

Richard Blanco

One sun rose on us today, kindled over our shores,
peeking over the Smokies, greeting the faces
of the Great Lakes, spreading a simple truth
across the Great Plains, then charging across the Rockies.
One light, waking up rooftops, under each one, a story
told by our silent gestures moving behind windows.

My face, your face, millions of faces in morning's mirrors,
each one yawning to life, crescendoing into our day:
pencil-yellow school buses, the rhythm of traffic lights,
fruit stands: apples, limes, and oranges arrayed like rainbows
begging our praise. Silver trucks heavy with oil or paper—
bricks or milk, teeming over highways alongside us,
on our way to clean tables, read ledgers, or save lives—
to teach geometry, or ring-up groceries as my mother did
for twenty years, so I could write this poem.

All of us as vital as the one light we move through,
the same light on blackboards with lessons for the day:
equations to solve, history to question, or atoms imagined,
the "I have a dream" we keep dreaming,
or the impossible vocabulary of sorrow that won't explain
the empty desks of twenty children marked absent
today, and forever. Many prayers, but one light
breathing color into stained glass windows,

life into the faces of bronze statues, warmth
onto the steps of our museums and park benches
as mothers watch children slide into the day.

One ground. Our ground, rooting us to every stalk
of corn, every head of wheat sown by sweat
and hands, hands gleaning coal or planting windmills
in deserts and hilltops that keep us warm, hands
digging trenches, routing pipes and cables, hands
as worn as my father's cutting sugarcane
so my brother and I could have books and shoes.

The dust of farms and deserts, cities and plains
mingled by one wind—our breath. Breathe. Hear it
through the day's gorgeous din of honking cabs,
buses launching down avenues, the symphony
of footsteps, guitars, and screeching subways,
the unexpected song bird on your clothes line.

Hear: squeaky playground swings, trains whistling,
or whispers across café tables, Hear: the doors we open
for each other all day, saying: hello, shalom,
buon giorno, howdy, namaste, or buenos días
in the language my mother taught me—in every language
spoken into one wind carrying our lives
without prejudice, as these words break from my lips.

One sky: since the Appalachians and Sierras claimed
their majesty, and the Mississippi and Colorado worked
their way to the sea. Thank the work of our hands:
weaving steel into bridges, finishing one more report
for the boss on time, stitching another wound
or uniform, the first brush stroke on a portrait,
or the last floor on the Freedom Tower
jutting into a sky that yields to our resilience.

One sky, toward which we sometimes lift our eyes
tired from work: some days guessing at the weather
of our lives, some days giving thanks for a love
that loves you back, sometimes praising a mother
who knew how to give, or forgiving a father
who couldn’t give what you wanted.

We head home: through the gloss of rain or weight
of snow, or the plum blush of dusk, but always—home,
always under one sky, our sky. And always one moon
like a silent drum tapping on every rooftop
and every window, of one country—all of us—
facing the stars
hope—a new constellation
waiting for us to map it,
waiting for us to name it—together.

Move-In

Janine Joseph

California, 1991

Aba had never seen a crane but called the white bird branching
from the street-front pepper tree a crane
and though we knew her eyes were whiting with cataracts
we hipped our boxes and stood nodding on the walk

Without miracle its wings untucked and our beagles split
airstrips of hackles up their coats Fact and in full-color
there it was The tallest bird in North America!
J. whooped And so it was

Hey welcome the neighbors said and said
it's earthquake season You all ought to strap down
the wall-to-wall-ware the china and mom's
Madonna & Child carved into a wheel of holywood

The waves'll start in the living room they said and shake out
like rattlesnakes from there the epicenter and head
to where the children'll sleep Things could get bad? I asked *Fast*
* * *

Janine Joseph on "Move-In"

What was the spark for this poem?

I'd been carrying with me, for many years, the image of the crane that appeared one day in my family's yard. Every time I turned the memory over in my mind, I could hear the excited barking of our seven beagles, thrilled at the sight of a bird they'd never seen before. To this day, I don't know which first drew me to the blank page: the image of the crane or the sound of the beagles letting me know there was something to see.

What was difficult about writing this poem?

I didn't know what to write beyond the crane and barking beagles, which

is probably why I returned to the memory so often. I knew I wanted to build a narrative moment from it, but it took me a long time to understand what I wanted to say about such an extraordinary event.

It was also very difficult, during the revision process, to cut the original last line of the poem.

What was easy about writing this poem?

Letting the grandmother (Aba) of the family be the first person to witness and (mis)identify the crane standing atop the tree. She was the first human I wrote into the poem and from her the rest of the family followed.

What should a young writer know about this poem?

In earlier drafts, "Move-In" appears much longer and extends vertically down the page. It was only when I read the poem aloud, countless times, during revision that I realized the poem needed to move horizontally—across the page—and with little punctuation. *Hearing* the poem out loud allowed me to recognize the shifts and pauses in the speaker's rendering of the moment.

What does this poem mean to you?

My family emigrated from the Philippines in separate trips over the course of several months. I flew, for example, without my mother or father. In a way, this poem offers an alternative history, one wherein a family begins their uncertain life in America together.

After Our Daughter's Autism Diagnosis

Kamilah Aisha Moon

I watched the backs
of college girlfriends
trailing off to mobile lives.
I watched them
until they were blips.

Ours was a sacred exile
then. Waterfalls
of words between us;
silhouettes in love,
tending our own.
The hours, clouds
floating past—
beds in the sky
where rain slept.

—

I often wake up dizzy,
the sun mocking us
as it douses her face.

My husband
says nothing,
his kisses
shallow.

What we don't say
we eat.

Halloween

Sandra Beasley

Somewhere in town tonight,
a woman is discovering
her inner Sexy Pirate.

This is not to be confused
with one's inner Sexy Witch,
Sexy Kitten, Sexy Librarian,
Sexy Bo Peep, Sexy Vampire,
Sexy Race Car Driver, or
inner Sexy Ophthalmologist.

She forgot to buy ribbon,
so she threads the corset's eyelets
with gym shoes laces.
She re-poofs the sleeves
of her buccaneer blouse.

Arrrr, she says to the mirror.
Argh, the mirror sighs in return.

Once I asked my mother why
anyone would wear tights like that
to net a fish.
Wouldn't your legs get cold?
Wouldn't your heels slip
on the wet deck of a ship? *Shush*,

my mother said, adjusting the wig
on her Sexy Cleopatra.
Somewhere in town tonight,
a sitter sets out the pumpkin.
A girl studies its fat head.
They punch its eyes in, so
it can see. They cut its mouth out,
so it can smile. *Now you bring it*

to life, the sitter will say.
And where its seeds had been,
the girl will place a flame.

Ode

An ode is similar to an apostrophe in that it's typically addressed to a particular person or object, but the ode has a more celebratory implication. The traditional Greek ode was intended to be sung and often celebrated an athletic triumph. As with most of the other modes in this anthology, contemporary poets have adapted the traditional concept of the ode to a variety of subject matters and rhetorical stances.

Ode to Jay-Z, Ending in the Rattle of a Fiend's Teeth

Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib

teach us how to hustle so / hard that they / never come for our daughters and / feast upon their dancing limbs or / the thick tangles of hair swarming / over their dark eyes / have we prayed at your feet / long enough for them to keep / what they came here with / after they are entombed in / the dirt / this is what is happening / in our America right now / another black girl was emptied / in Brooklyn last night and / I watch this on the news in Ohio and weep / even though I know that it is not / my mother / because the girl on TV has no name other than *gone* / and my mother held on / to her name until her body / became ash / until she was a mountain of white / powder / that's that shit / we take razor blades to / and drown / the whole hood in / that shit that got us out / the projects / and left whole families / of men / starved and longing / is this what becomes / of the women we love / consumed even in death by / a flock of men / who have mistaken their grief / for a persistent hunger / that comes again each / sweat-soaked morning with / a new set of freshly forgotten corpses / overflowing in its arms / after coming down from / the cross / how did you fix your hands / to hold a child without / covering her in decades / of blood / and have you taught her / to run yet / not the way we run / into the arms of a lover / but the way you ran / before the first gold record hung / in a home far enough away / from the block / you finally stopped / hearing the clatter of ravening jaws / clashing together at sunset / we still hear it out here / it gets louder with each / black girl hollowed out / and erased / if you can't feed them into silence / again / can you at least rap for us / over all this noise / everyone I love has had / the hardest time / sleeping

* * *

Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib on "Ode to Jay-Z, Ending in the Rattle of a Fiend's Teeth"

What was the spark for this poem?
I was interested in considering the silence around the deaths of black women. Of black deaths that are not men. I wanted to weave this into a landscape of Jay-Z's lyrics and narratives. It fit into a series of poems I was doing at the time.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
I think the most difficult thing was working in a way that invoked clear language around a musician while pointing toward a very serious emotion.

What was easy about writing this poem?
I felt the most ease when I arrived at the ending, if I'm being honest.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
Absolutely: everything in your life, all the things around you that you find enjoyable are worthy of building a bridge with.

What does this poem mean to you?
It meant a lot, I think, to be able to expand something I love into something larger.

Ode to Buttoning and Unbuttoning My Shirt

Ross Gay

No one knew or at least
I didn't know
they knew
what the thin disks
threaded here
on my shirt
might give me
in terms of joy
this is not something to be taken lightly
the gift
of buttoning one's shirt
slowly
top to bottom
or bottom
to top or sometimes
the buttons
will be on the other
side and
I am a woman
that morning
slipping the glass
through its slot
I tread
differently that day
or some of it
anyway
my conversations
are different
and the car bomb slicing the air
and the people in it
for a quarter mile
and the honeybee's
legs furred with pollen

mean another
thing to me
than on the other days
which too have
been drizzled in this
simplest of joys
in this world
of spaceships and subatomic
this and that
two maybe three
times a day
some days
I have the distinct pleasure
of slowly untethering
the one side
from the other
which is like unbuckling
a stack of vertebrae
with delicacy
for I must only use
the tips
of my fingers
with which I will
one day close
my mother's eyes
this is as delicate
as we can be
in this life
practicing
like this
giving the raft of our hands
to the clumsy spider
and blowing soft until she
lifts her damp heft and
crawls off
we practice like this
pushing the seed into the earth
like this first
in the morning
then at night

we practice
sliding the bones home.

Ode to Stone

Terrance Hayes

My child is old as stone
Which does not budge from dirt

Though he will not wake me
Half-naked from my dreams

Though we will not wait for a yellow bus
To climb the hill at dawn

My child is old as the stone
Which sank years ago into the earth

Though he still likes naked in my dreams
Though I say his name at dawn

My child is old as stone
This morning I walk the empty field

This morning I fill my mouth with dirt
From a hill gorged with bones

Pastoral

The pastoral poem traditionally has been one associated with a country landscape; the original pastoral poems were written in honor of Greek shepherds and their homes in the mountains. Over the years, the term "pastoral" came to apply to any poem that celebrated the romantic rural lifestyle and landscape: farms and cows and haystacks and such. In contemporary poetry, the pastoral mode refers to any poem that has at its heart the landscape, whether rural or urban. Writing in the pastoral mode means exploring the relationship between the physical world and the poem's other concerns, whether love or grief or some other existential question.

Landscape with one of the earthworm's ten hearts

Laura Kasischke

and also a small boy with a golden crossbow,
and a white rabbit full of arrows.
Also snow. And the sky, of course, the color
of a gently stirred winter soup.

I am the inert figure behind the barren apple tree.
The one who wonders for what purpose
the real world was created. I ruin everything by being in it, while one
of the earthworm's hearts, deep in the ground, fills up the rest
of the landscape with longing, and fiery collisions, and caves
full of credit cards and catalogues. You can tell

I hear it, too, by the look on my face:

That inaudible thumping insisting without believing
one is enough is enough is enough.

In Chicano Park

David Tomas Martinez

No matter if half the park is concrete
and stanchions supporting a bridge,

near industrial buildings yellow in the sun,
their stalks of smoke soaring awake,

next to empty lots and bus stops
without seats or signs or schedules,

near houses bright with paint
the color of dented cans of Spam,

men walking the streets to work
look longingly towards their doors.

No matter if all the murals decay
and the statue of Zapata falls,

more months pile to be swept, and years
ironed, folded, and put away in drawers,

and if jail bars bite off chunks of your view,
remember a wise gambler's words on craps:

call for the dice back. And between rolls,
wipe the dust off the dice, as bills coil a foot

in the wind because life is a wild emotion
lying in the grass, soon to be green.

Not even bags of chips, cheetahs with wind,
avoid being tackled, gouged, and ripped apart .

We all eventually submit, are arched over
by a hyena grin and growl in the sun.

Soon the spots will show and the world will pull tight with relief
as the jungle rallies around us, as we smile now and cry later.

Persona

A persona poem is one ostensibly written from the point of view of a speaker other than the poet. Persona comes from the Latin for mask, and these poems typically tend to make that mask obvious, finding a way to signal to the reader who's speaking. Often poets write from the point of view of historical or fictional figures; this allows the reader the dual pleasure of seeing the world or an event in a particular way, but also drawing on the reader's pre-existing knowledge of the speaker or situation. The persona itself becomes an allusion.

Trumpet Player, 1963

Mark Halliday

> *And when I get to Surf City I'll be shootin' the curls,*
> And checkin' out the parties for surfer girls.

When Jan and Dean recorded "Surf City"
there must have been one guy—

I see this trumpet player (was there even a horn section in that song?
Say there was)—

I see this trumpet player with his tie askew
or maybe he's wearing a loose tropical-foliage shirt
sitting on a metal chair waiting
for the session to reach the big chorus
where Jane and Dean exult
Two girls for every boy
and he's thinking
of his hundred nights on his buddy Marvin's hairy stainy sofa
and the way one girl is far too much and besides
he hasn't had the one in fourteen months, wait,
it's fifteen now.
Surfing—what life actually lets guys ride boards
on waves? Is it all fiction? Is it a joke?
Jan and Dean and their pal Brian act like it's a fine, good joke
whereas this trumpet player thinks it's actually shit,

if anybody asked him, a tidal wave of shit.
Nobody's asking.
The producer jiggles in his headphones. He wants more drums
right after *all you gotta do is just wink your eye!*
This producer is chubby and there is no chance,
my trumpet player thinks, that this chubhead gets
two swingin' honeys at any party ever and besides
on a given night a man only has one cock, or
am I wrong? And besides, you wake up wanting five aspirin
in an air lousy with lies, or half-lifes.
And that's with only one girl.

But why am I so pissed here, he thinks,
when all these guys are hot for a hit?
Because I'm deep like Coltrane and they're all shallow,
right? Or because
I'm this smelly sour session man with a bent nose
and they're all hip to this fine joke?

The song is cooking, it's nearly in the can,
everybody has that hot-hit look
and my trumpet man has a thought: Sex
is not really it—what they're singing about—
they're singing about being here.
This dumb song is *it*:
this studio, this is the only Surf City,
here. And that's the great joke.

Okay, surf dicks, I am hip. But
there's gonna be pain in Kansas, he thinks,
lifting his horn and watching for the cue,
when they hear about Surf City and believe it.

Of Thee I Sing

Ocean Vuong

We made it, baby.
We're riding in the back of the black
limousine. They have lined
the road to shout our names.
They have faith in your golden hair
& pressed blue suit.
They have a good citizen

in me. I love my country.
I pretend nothing is wrong.
I pretend not to see the
man
& his blonde daughter diving
for cover, that you're not saying
my name & it's not coming out
like a slaughterhouse.
I'm not Jackie O yet
& there isn't a hole in your head, a brief
rainbow through a mist
of rust. I love my country
but who am I kidding? I'm holding
your still-hot thoughts in,
darling, my sweet, sweet
Jack, I'm reaching across the trunk
for a shard of your memory,
the one where we kiss & the nation
glitters. Your slumped back.
Your hand letting go. You're all over
the seat now, deepening
my fuschia dress. But I'm a good
citizen, surrounded by Jesus
& ambulances. I love
this country. The twisted faces.
My country. The blue sky. Black
limousine. My one white glove
glistening pink—with all
our American dreams.

Wonder Woman Dreams of the Amazon

Jeannine Hall Gailey

I miss the tropes of Paradise—green vines
roped around wrists, jasmine coronets,
the improbable misty clothing of my tribe.

I dream of the land where they celebrated
my birth, named me after their patron Goddess.
I was to be a warrior for their kind.

I miss my mother, Hippolyta.
In my dreams she wraps me tightly
again in the American flag,

warning me, “Cling to your bracelets,
your magic lasso. Don't be a fool for men.”
She's always lecturing me, telling me

not to leave her. Sometimes she changes
into a doe, and I see my father
shooting her, her blood. Sometimes,

in these dreams, it is me who shoots her.
My daily transformation
from prim kitten-bowed suit to bustier

with red-white-and-blue stars
is less disturbing. The invisible jet
makes for clean escapes.

The animals are my spies and allies;
inexplicably, snow-feathered doves
appear in my hands. I capture Nazis

and Martians with boomerang grace.
When I turn and turn, the music plays louder,
the glow around me burns white-hot,

I become everything I was born to be,
the dreams of the mother,

the threat of the father.

Portrait

One of the things you'll often hear about the work poems do is that they paint a picture. Poems in the portrait mode do so rather explicitly, using the depiction of a person as their primary concern. Many contemporary poets write self-portraits—but very often complicate them by making the poem a self-portrait *as* something else: Wikipedia entry, tumor, etc. In this way, the poet creates a complex or unusual juxtaposition between the idea of the self and the thing the self is inhabiting. It's a way of challenging our concept of who we are, of placing the self in a larger context.

For Jake "The Snake" Roberts, on the Occasion of Making an Unlikely Out in Centerfield During a Charity Softball Game

Colette Arrand

Like every catch before or since, yours is a matter of geometry
and probability. To say this is to admit that I believe in miracles.

Professional wrestling is the work of death and resurrection. I watch
to see your throat cut. To see you rise, nearly ruined. Over and over.

In your documentary's climax, you are smoking crack in the bathroom.
You show me this to articulate that some men prefer ruin.

Again the gambler crows that he has twenty-two. The game
is blackjack. Few are born to cast lots, but who does this stop?

Self Portrait as a Gorgeous Tumor

Rebecca Hazelton

The idea of breakfast in bed
versus the sloppy practice:
thumb the soft peach and the nap splits open,
the wet surface sister to the glossed grape,
the shining plum, the nectarine
with its faint veins,
all that clusters and spreads
seeds with a hint
of more to come.
I watch the ceiling
for cracks, a water stain
a new territory
to mark with dragons, to demarcate
the unknown with known designations.
Glazed in fluoridated water
like a red wheelbarrow, I am
in the hot tropics of Florida,
where the geckos on fine, invisible hairs
Velcro across
the bathroom window,
and so much depends
on the polished and perfunctory
hanging over all of us
the chandelier promise
of a one way trip over and out
to the happy kingdom
where the princess sleeps and sleeps
and no one registers
the slow explosion
of sawdust, feathers, glitter.

Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry

Dean Rader

Dean Rader was born in Stockton, California during the Summer of Love. His sorrow is his own. He believes in star-sting and misnomer; he carries a toy whistle in his pocket. American by nationality, he was conceived in a Fiat near the Place du Châtelet. If asked, Rader will lie and say he doesn't remember it, but his lazy eyes and hunched back give him away. His left pinky finger, broken from basketball, has never healed, which he attributes to the caesura of distance and longing. His heart, the size of a normal man's heart, has been used as a model for a forensic mannequin. As a young boy, he once carried a small package to the river, but it was the wrong address. If asked to describe the river, he quotes van Heisenstadt ("die grenzen des wasser nicht vom errinerung"). Rader is not the little cricket. He is not a scissors for lefty. His soul, the size of a tiny condom, slides quickly onto time's blind spot. In 2004, he was asked about time's blind spot but responded only that "time, like a bandage, is always already wound and unwound." Once, as a student in college, he grew a third sideburn. Darkness, his maquette, darkness, his morning coffee. Rader's father studied to be a mortician; his mother was a therapist and, not surprisingly, Rader pursued both. His head, matted with crude sketches of benches, nipples, and flower petals is roughly the size of the Place du Châtelet. Strong at math from an early age, he helped develop what has come to be known as the Osaka Postulate, which proves that the square root of asyndeton is equal to the inshpere of trespass, skin-spark, and elegy. As for his own spiritual beliefs, Rader is silent, though one of his recent poems, entitled "The Last Day of 34" suggests an influence of Simone Weil ("community is work. // For all I know, God may be in both. / For all you know, God may be both) and Luigi Sacramone ("We want so much. // We only believe / in what we ask for"). Considered neither the lip blister nor the noodle wrenc, Rader has emerged, at least somewhat, as the *repetitio rerum*. In more recent work, he denies this (though indirectly) citing instead his commitment to interlocutory boundaries (bornage) through what he calls the "phatic interstice." At present his voice, the pitch and timbre of a young girl's, asks only for Tang. Consumed by his charity work with the NGO Our Uncle of Instrumentality, he has stopped writing entirely. When questioned about this at a 2007 fundraiser, Rader quipped, "Let my words say what I cannot." Since then, a fragment of an unpublished poem attributed to Rader has started appearing on the internet:

> Line up and line out
>
> says the moonwhittle.
>
> Loss is the ring on our finger, the bright gem
>
> compassing every step as we drop down.
>
> Believe in what you know and you'll go blind.

Experts doubt its authenticity.
* * *

Dean Rader on "Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry"

What was the spark for this poem?
A few years ago, I noticed someone created a Wikipedia page for me but also noticed many of the details were incorrect. I decided not only to fix those errors but also, as an experiment, to insert new but more outrageous fake facts about myself. But, every time I did that, the invisible Wikipedia gnomes would correct those. That led me to the idea of a bio or Wikipedia entry that was compiled with incorrect information but also information that is subjective or interior rather than objective or exterior. So, instead of data like where you were born or where you went to school, the information would include what your fears are or how you feel about puppies, etc.

What was difficult about writing this poem?
Figuring out the most effective ratio actual true objective facts, true subjective facts, and funny fake facts. Also, the temptation is to overwrite this poem, to adopt a lyric voice, but, for this poem to be successful, it has to sound like a skeptical third party wrote it.

What was easy about writing this poem?
DR: Settling into the Wikipedia voice. We read so many Wikipedia entries, it was as though I had the rhythm and tone preloaded and ready for deployment.

What should a young writer know about this poem?
It is wholly liberating to write about yourself in the third person. I loved that for this poem there is Dean Rader but also "Dean Rader." I wanted to make "Dean Rader" more interesting than Dean Rader.

What does this poem mean to you?
Well, a lot. For one, it wound up becoming the title of my collection of poems in which it appears. More importantly, it seemed to strike a chord for many readers, so much so that I was interviewed about it for *The Kenyon Review*. That rarely happens for a single poem. But, I also think it is a kind a metaphor for life—it is a playful exercise in the larger process of identity making. We are what we amalgam.

Protest

The very act of writing a poem is itself a political act; to write a poem is to resist the dominant culture, which doesn't much value poetry (alas!). Protest poems are explicitly grappling with contemporary political issues: topics we might see on CNN. However, unlike an overpaid television pundit, the job of the poet is not merely to argue for a given point of view. The job of the poet is to explore, to expose, to complicate, to question. A poem that has its mind made up from the start is not a poem; it's propaganda. There's a time and place for propaganda, of course, but not in your poems. Protest poems are important, even essential, in a civil society. (And even more so in an uncivil society.)

38

Layli Long Soldier

Here, the sentence will be respected.

I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate.

For example, all sentences will begin with capital letters.

Likewise, the history of the sentence will be honored by ending each one with appropriate punctuation such as a period or question mark, thus bringing the idea to (momentary) completion.

You may like to know, I do not consider this a "creative piece."

I do not regard this as a poem of great imagination or a work of fiction.

Also, historical events will not be dramatized for an "interesting" read.

Therefore, I feel most responsible to the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought.

That said, I will begin.

You may or may not have heard about the Dakota 38.

If this is the first time you've heard of it, you might wonder, "What is the Dakota 38?"

The Dakota 38 refers to thirty-eight Dakota men who were executed by hanging, under orders from President Abraham Lincoln.

To date, this is the largest "legal" mass execution in US history.

The hanging took place on December 26th, 1862—the day after Christmas.

This was the *same we ek* that President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

In the preceding sentence, I italicize "same week" for emphasis.

There was a movie titled *Lincoln* about the presidency of Abraham Lincoln.

The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation was included in the film *Lincoln*; the hanging of the Dakota 38 was not.

In any case, you might be asking, "Why were thirty-eight Dakota men hung?"

As a side note, the past tense of hang is *hung*, but when referring to the capital punishment of hanging, the correct tense is *hanged*.

So it's possible that you're asking, "Why were thirty-eight Dakota men hanged?"

They were hanged for the Sioux Uprising.

I want to tell you about the Sioux Uprising, but I don't know where to begin.

I may jump around and details will not unfold in chronological order.

Keep in mind, I am not a historian.

So I will recount facts as best as I can, given limited resources and understanding.

Before Minnesota was a state, the Minnesota region, generally speaking, was the traditional homeland for Dakota, Anishinaabeg and Ho-Chunk people.

During the 1800s, when the US expanded territory, they "purchased" land from the Dakota people as well as the other tribes.

But another way to understand that sort of "purchase" is: Dakota leaders ceded land to the US Government in exchange for money and goods, but most importantly, the safety of their people.

Some say that Dakota leaders did not understand the terms they were entering, or they never would have agreed.

Even others call the entire negotiation, "trickery."

But to make whatever-it-was official and binding, the US Government drew up an initial treaty.

This treaty was later replaced by another (more convenient) treaty, and then another.

I've had difficulty unraveling the terms of these treaties, given the legal speak and

congressional language.

As treaties were abrogated (broken) and new treaties were drafted, one after another, the new treaties often referenced old defunct treaties, and it is a muddy, switchback trail to follow.

Although I often feel lost on this trail, I know I am not alone.

However, as best as I can put the facts together, in 1851, Dakota territory was contained to a twelve-mile by one-hundred-fifty-mile long strip along the Minnesota river.

But just seven years later, in 1858, the northern portion was ceded (taken) and the southern portion was (conveniently) allotted, which reduced Dakota land to a stark ten-mile tract.

These amended and broken treaties are often referred to as the Minnesota Treaties.

The word *Minnesota* comes from *mni* which means water; *sota* which means turbid.

Synonyms for turbid include muddy, unclear, cloudy, confused, and smoky.

Everything is in the language we use.

For example, a treaty is, essentially, a contract between two sovereign nations.

The US treaties with the Dakota Nation were legal contracts that promised money.

It could be said, this money was payment for the land the Dakota ceded; for living within assigned boundaries (a reservation); and for relinquishing rights to their vast hunting territory which, in turn, made Dakota people dependent on other means to survive: money.

The previous sentence is circular, which is akin to so many aspects of history.

As you may have guessed by now, the money promised in the turbid treaties did not make it into the hands of Dakota people.

In addition, local government traders would not offer credit to “Indians” to purchase food or goods.

Without money, store credit, or rights to hunt beyond their ten-mile tract of land, Dakota people began to starve.

The Dakota people were starving.

The Dakota people starved.

In the preceding sentence, the word “starved” does not need italics for emphasis.

One should read, “The Dakota people starved,” as a straightforward and plainly stated fact.

As a result—and without other options but to continue to starve—Dakota people retaliated.

Dakota warriors organized, struck out and killed settlers and traders.

This revolt is called the Sioux Uprising.

Eventually, the US Cavalry came to Mnisota to confront the Uprising.

Over one thousand Dakota people were sent to prison.

As already mentioned, thirty-eight Dakota men were subsequently hanged.

After the hanging, those one thousand Dakota prisoners were released.

However, as further consequence, what remained of Dakota territory in Mnisota was dissolved (stolen).

The Dakota people had no land to return to.

This means they were exiled.

Homeless, the Dakota people of Mnisota were relocated (forced) onto reservations in South Dakota and Nebraska.

Now, every year, a group called the the Dakota 38 + 2 Riders conduct a memorial horse ride from Lower Brule, South Dakota, to Mankato, Mnisota.

The Memorial Riders travel 325 miles on horseback for eighteen days, sometimes through sub-zero blizzards.

They conclude their journey on December 26th, the day of the hanging.

Memorials help focus our memory on particular people or events.

Often, memorials come in the forms of plaques, statues or gravestones.

The memorial for the Dakota 38 is not an object inscribed with words, but an *act*.

Yet, I started this piece because I was interested in writing about grasses.

So, there is one other event to include, although it's not in chronological order and we must backtrack a little.

When the Dakota people were starving, as you may remember, government traders would not extend store credit to "Indians."

One trader named Andrew Myrick is famous for his refusal to provide credit to Dakota people by saying, "If they are hungry, let them eat grass."

There are variations of Myrick's words, but they are all something to that effect.

When settlers and traders were killed during the Sioux Uprising, one of the first to be

executed by the Dakota was Andrew Myrick.

When Myrick's body was found,

his mouth was stuffed with grass.

I am inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem.

There's irony in their poem.

There was no text.

"Real" poems do not "really" require words.

I have italicized the previous sentence to indicate inner dialogue, a revealing moment.

But, on second thought, the particular words "Let them eat grass" click the gears of the poem into place.

So, we could also say, language and word choice are crucial to the poem's work.

Things are circling back again.

Sometimes, when in a circle, if I wish to exit, I must leap.

And let the body swing.

From the platform.

Out

to the grasses.

from **Reaching Guantanamo**
Solmaz Sharif

Dear Salim,

Love, are you well? Do they you?
I worry so much. Lately, my hair , even
my skin . The doctors tell me it's .
I believe them. It shouldn't
. Please don't worry.
in the yard, and moths
have gotten to your mother's
, remember?
I have enclosed some —made this
batch just for you. Please eat well. Why
did you me to remarry? I told
and he couldn't it.
I would never .
Love, I'm singing that you loved,
remember, the line that went
" "? I'm holding
the just for you.

Yours,

Horses

Brian Turner

At 17 hands, their high-traction shoes clatter on the asphalt
as they canter forward, snorting, Perspex face shields a clear armor
for their wild-eyed vision of Molotov cocktails, stones, hurled debris,
the adrenaline of the boulevard ringing in the horns of their ears,
reflective shin guards glinting above mid-cannon and coronet, blare
of flashbulbs cracking the night open in a pure shock of light,
illuminating the signature of blaze and star on forehead and nose
as polycarbonate batons sing past their stiffened ears before they wheel
and turn, the boot heels of officers digging in, spurring their flanks,
the curtains of their lips pulled back by a cinching of the reins
at the bit, slobber straps wet and shining, their wide flat teeth
biting at the invisible before them as their nostrils fill with the fear
and smell of burnt exhaust, with the human calculations of misery
and pain, trajectory and loss, brokenness, ruination, the factory
of tears in its awful manufacture gone unbridled in civilization's
rough shell, and still the officers urge *forward* as the missiles
trace a bright geometry, patient within the night's
dark fabric, the obscene beauty of it lost on no one,
as the clarity of hooves hammers against the building facades
and rises to the upper stories, just as hooves have done for millennia,
clanging through Damascus and Prague, Vladivostok and Rome,
with hussars and Cossacks and mamluks, lancers and dragoons
forming up horses abreast, the psychology of muscle and height
joined by the long history of the cavalry in its relentless charge—
the defeat of Crassus at the hands of scale-armored Parthian cataphractsat
the Battle of Carrhae, in 53 BCE; Napoleon's cuirassiers riding
headlong into the Highland squares at Waterloo; Shingen's cavalry
overrunning arquebusiers on the snowy plains of Mikata in 1573—
and just as horses did in the days of old, these horses shove and shoulder
through the protestors in their human chicane, the trampled left
curled on the roadbed behind, wailing, as police lights strobe
the moment in a wash of red, color standard for the God of War,
the god of helmets and boots and stirrups and sweat-soaked horse blankets,

who promises steamed oats and top cut alfalfa at the road's end,
god of the threshing hooves, the riot god, who quickens panic in the driven horse
by application of the baton to the curvature of the world in its bony skull,
the god who stirs their blood into action against the refutations of consent,
pressing them on, on into the valley of placard and protest, effigies
rising from the crowd as if their leaders had lost their footing in the world
and simply rose up in flame, up to the howling god, who calls on the horses
to do the same, exhorting each to ignore the monocular field within its crazed eye,
to view the crowd from those rare heights where flame burns free of its fuel,
to rise up on its hindquarters, as in a great statue of terror, its majesty irrefutable,
the god of the loudspeaker commanding them to spark pavement and stone,
saying—*Bring your hooves down hard, my horses, bring them down.*

The Gun Joke

Jamaal May

It's funny, she says,
how many people are shock ed by this shooting
and the next and next and the next.

She doesn't mean funny as in funny, but funny
as in blood soup tastes funny when you stir in soil.
Stop me if you haven't heard this one:

A young man/old man/teenage boy
walks into an office/theater/daycare/club
and empties a magazine into a crowd of strangers/
enemies/family/students.

Ever hear the one about the shotgun? What do you call it
when a shotgun tests a liquor store's bulletproof glass?
What's the difference between a teenager
with hands in the air and a paper target charging at a cop?
What do you call it when a man sets his own house on fire,
takes up a sniper position, and waits for firefighters?
Stop me if you haven't heard this one before.

The first man to pull a gun on me
said it was only a joke,
but never so much as smiled.
The second said *this is definitely not a joke*,
and then his laughter crackled through me
like electrostatic—funny how that works.

When she says it's funny she means funny
as in crazy and crazy as in
this shouldn't happen. This shouldn't happen
as in something is off. Funny as in
off—as in,
ever since a small caliber bullet chipped his spine,
your small friend walks kinda' funny
    and his smile is off.

Appendix A: 75 Poetry Experiments

What follows is a series of writing prompts to help get you started writing poems. When one of the experiments references one of the elements of poetry, look it up in this book to help you play with the elements in the ways that they are meant to be played with. We have already discussed the value of constraints on the creative process, so challenge yourself to make art out of the ways that the prompts put constraints on your writing process. Do them one at a time. Or mix and match them. Whatever you want—just try to have fun writing poems.

— — — — — — — — — — — — —

1 Write an aubade that is also an elegy.
2 Write a poem that uses a line from a song as its title. The poem should be about anything but that one song. Credit the song in an epigraph.
3 Write a poem that paraphrases a song. Avoid using the actual song lyrics in the poem.
4 Write a poem that begins but does not end.
5 Write a poem you would not show your mother.
6 Write a poem that is something else in disguise (along the lines of Matthew Olzmann's "Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem").
7 Write a poem that tells the origin story of someone in your family (the way superheroes have origin stories, usually involving lab accidents or destroyed home planets).
8 Write a poem that is a sequel (or a prequel) to one of the poems in this anthology.
9 Write a nocturne that is also a protest poem.
10 Write a poem for your future self to find.
11 Write a poem about a well-known historical event from the point of view of a witness to that event. You can make up the witness or assume the point of view or someone who was present or even involved in the event. "My Aunt Gertrude Watches from a Dallas Sidewalk as JFK Is Shot" or "Mary Todd Lincoln Watches Her Husband Deliver the Gettysburg Address" or "Simon

Cowell Watches Confetti Fall on Kelly Clarkson's Head."

12 Write a poem that argues with one of the poems in this anthology. (Call it "Kim Addonizio Is Wrong About Love," or "Terrance Hayes Is Wrong About Stone," or something along those lines.)

13 Write a poem that makes your readers hungry. Maybe even for food.

14 Write a found poem that is also a self-portrait.

15 Write a sad poem with a funny title. Or a funny poem with a sad title.

16 Write a poem that values image over narrative.

17 Write a poem that starts with the line "You're not going to believe this, but . . ." then take out that line before you show the poem to anyone.

18 Write a poem that uses an actual headline from a newspaper (or a newspaper's website) as its title.

19 Write an elegy for someone who isn't dead yet.

20 Write a poem from the point of view of an animated character.

21 Write a poem that is a letter to your 14-year-old self.

22 Write a poem that begins with "My name is____" and explores what it means to be you.

23 Write an ars poetica that is also an ode to a very specific object from your childhood.

24 Write a list poem in which the listed items seem to have no obvious, logical connection to each other. Then use the title to suggest a connection.

25 Write a poem that goes through every doorway it creates.

26 Write a poem that observes without interpretation.

27 Write a poem that interprets without observation.

28 Write a meditative poem that muses on the flawed nature of memory.

29 Write a poem that reboots one of your earlier poems.

30 Write a poem inspired by a recent dream but don't acknowledge that it's a dream. Bring it to life instead.

31 Write a poem that privileges music over meaning.

32 Write a poem about the current season that reverses the usual associations we have about that season. Pay special attention to image and mood.

33 Write a pastoral poem that contradicts itself.

34 Write an aubade that uses an extended metaphor.

35 Write a poem that makes use of colloquial language or slang.

36 Write a poem that is built from contemporary slang combined with archaisms.

37 Go to a gallery or an art museum and spend an hour looking at a work of art and thinking about it. Yes, an hour. Then write an ekphrastic poem about the art.

38 Go to a gallery or an art museum and instead of looking at the titles of the artwork, name them yourself. Write those names down so you can remember

them—you now have a list of poem titles. So choose one and write the poem that goes with the title.

39 Write a poem that calls attention to a little-known but important historical event. Privilege the sentence over the line, but make sure it's a poem and not an essay.

40 Write a poem that does not know where to begin.

41 Write a poem that scares you.

42 Write a poem about yourself from the point of view of someone who knows you only in a specific context (such as your Sunday School teacher, your guidance counselor, the person who sells you the same latte every morning).

43 Write a poem in three parts in which each part explores the same event from a different point of view: one first person, one second person, one third person.

44 Write a poem about what you want most in the world. What would happen if you got it?

45 Write a poem that defines the value of something at the beginning. At the end, use the turn to redefine that value.

46 Write a poem in six sections. Use a single sextet in the first section, a quintet in the second, a quatrain in the third and so on, all the way to a single line in the sixth and final line of the poem.

47 Write a poem that is between thirteen and twenty sections long, but keep each section five lines or less. Use at least one weird or impossible image in each section.

48 Write a portrait of someone or something no one else pays any attention to.

49 Write an ode to an abstract concept. Provide at least one concrete, specific image in every line.

50 Write a poem about how to do something. Do not mention that something.

51 Write a poem about an embarrassing moment from your life.

52 Write a poem about what you would do if you had super powers.

53 Take the previous two poems and braid them together to create one poem.

54 Write a poem that tells a family secret. The secret doesn't have to be true.

55 Write a beautiful poem that threatens to beat someone up.

56 Find a poem written in a language you don't understand, translate that poem based not on what a translating dictionary tells you, but according to what English words the foreign words look like.

57 Write a science fiction poem.

58 Write a poem with a mystery in it.

59 Write an inaugural poem for any historical US president.

60 Write a contrapuntal elegy.

61 Rewrite a fairy tale or fable as a lyric poem.

62 Write a poem about math.

63 Write a poem about the things you will tell your children one day.
64 Write a poem that superimposes one image over another.
65 Write a poem that offers a series of unrelated images, juxtaposed for meaning.
66 Write a poem that opens with a big claim about how the world works. Contradict the claim within a few lines.
67 Write a persona poem in the voice of a famous historical or fictional figure. In the poem, reveal something important about yourself (though it appears to be about your persona). Use the title to tell us who the speaker is.
68 Write a poem that uses syllogisms.
69 Write a poem that goes backward—start at the end and go back to the beginning.
70 Write a poem that makes nonsensical claims and then draws logical conclusions from those claims.
71 Revise one of your poems into another art form: collage, pencil sketch, crayon drawing, popsicle-stick sculpture.
72 Write an ode that relies heavily on music and rhythm.
73 Write a poem that sincerely apologizes for something you have done, but do not literally apologize for anything.
74 Write an occasional poem about an extremely personal event.
75 Write an apostrophe to someone who probably doesn't remember you, though you have a very specific recollection of them.

Appendix B: Additional Reading

Addonizio, Kim and Dorianne Laux. *The Poet's Companion*. Norton, 1997. A book about poetry technique and the writing life.

Agodon, Kelli Russell and Martha Silano. *The Daily Poet: Day-By-Day Prompts For Your Writing Practice*. Two Sylvias Press, 2013. Just what the title promises.

Behn, Robyn and Chase Twichell, eds. *The Practice of Poetry*. Harper Perennial, 1992. A fine collection of poetry exercises created by poets who teach.

Corn, Alfred. *The Poem's Heartbeat: A Manual of Prosody*. Copper Canyon, 2008 (originally published in 1997). A study of rhyme, rhythm, and meter.

Doty, Mark. *The Art of Description: World into Word*. Graywolf, 2010. A fairly short book crammed with wisdom about how description works.

Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Shambhala, 2005. Suggests a Zen approach to writing, offering a number of prompts and exercises to tap into your creative impulses.

Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*. W. W. Norton, 1979. Wisdom on the nature of poetry from a former United States poet laureate.

Hunley Tom C. *The Poetry Gymnasium: 94 Proven Exercises to Shape Your Best Verse*. McFarland, 2011. A large book of poetry exercises.

Kooser, Ted. *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*. Bison Books, 2005. A book of advice about how to write poems and live with poetry for young poets by the former US Poet Laureate.

Lerner, Ben. *The Hatred of Poetry*. FSG, 2016. The author explores why so many people say they don't care for poetry and, in the end, offers a defense of the art.

Lockward, Diane. *The Crafty Poet: A Portable Workshop*. Wind Publications, 2013. Writing prompts, interviews with poets, and poems aimed at helping you overcome writer's block.

Longenbach, James. *The Art of the Poetic Line*. Graywolf, 2007. A brief book that takes a deep dive into how the line functions in poetry.

McDowell, Gary L. and F. Daniel Rzicznek, eds. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry*. Rose Metal Press, 2010. Lots of prose poems and essays by poets on the nature of the prose poem.

Orr, David. *Beautiful and Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry*. Harper Perennial, 2012. Opinions about the state of poetry in the twenty-tens.

Pinsky, Robert. *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999. A useful examination of how sound and syntax work together in poems.

Ruefle, Mary. *Madness, Rack, and Honey: Collected Lectures*. Wave Books, 2012. A compilation of thoughtful lectures on poetics.

Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Life of Poetry*. Paris Press, 1996. A book about the importance of poetry to democracy and life in the United States.

Saje, Natasha. *Windows and Doors: A Poet Reads Literary Theory*. University of Michigan Press, 2014. This one's not for the faint of heart. It's dense and theoretical, but chock full of insight.

Strand, Mark and Eavan Boland. *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. Norton, 2000. A hefty volume of poetic forms with examples.
Theune, Michael, ed. *Structure & Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*. Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2007. A book about poetic structure featuring essays about model structures by a variety of poets.
Turco, Lewis Putnam. *The Book of Forms*. University Press of New England, 2012. A handbook of poetics with a significant focus on form and fixed forms in poetry.
Voigt, Ellen Bryant. *The Art of Syntax: Rhythm of Thought, Rhythm of Song*. Graywolf, 2009. This book explores the nuances and complexities of the relationship between syntax, sentence, and meaning.

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